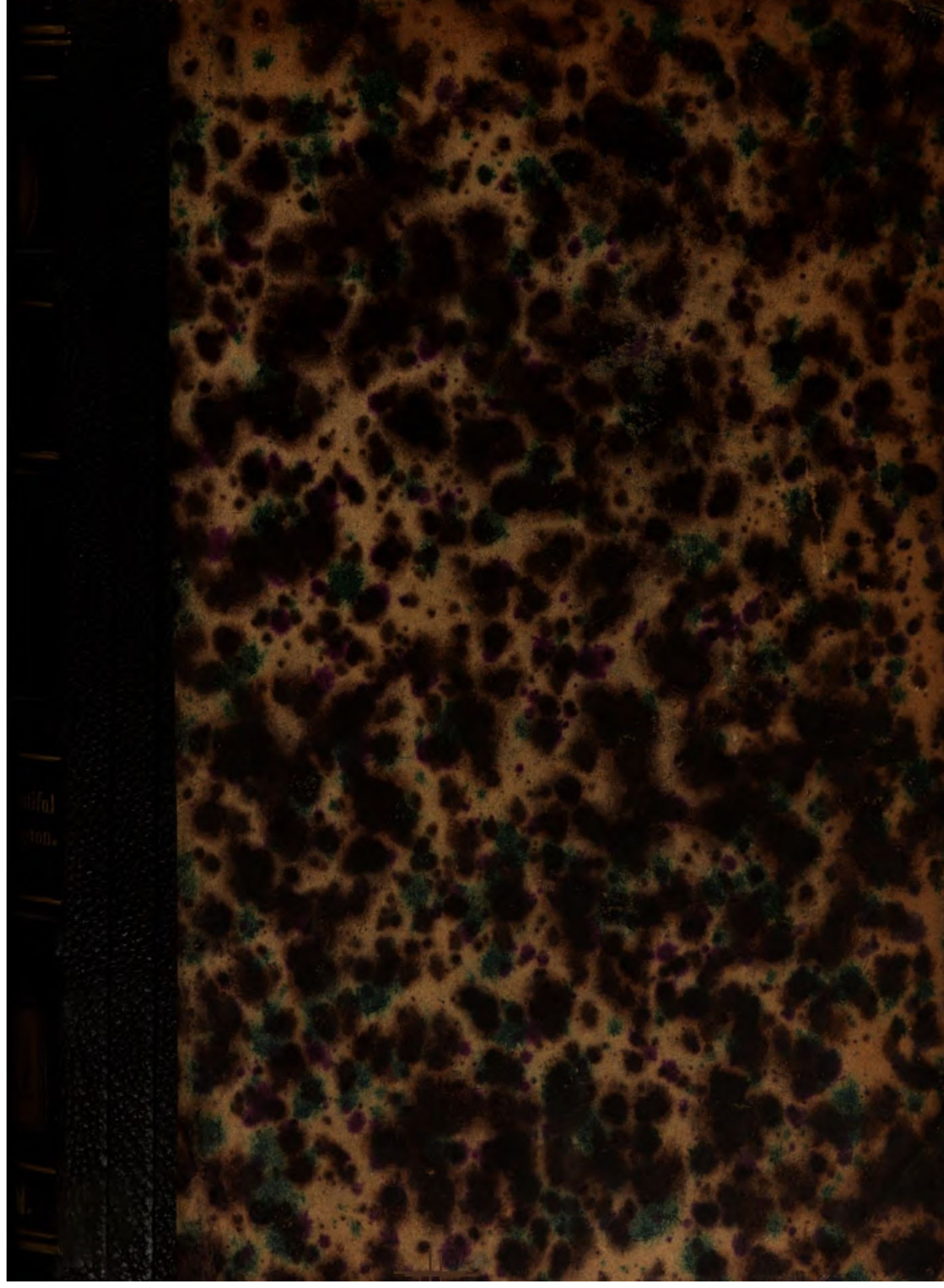
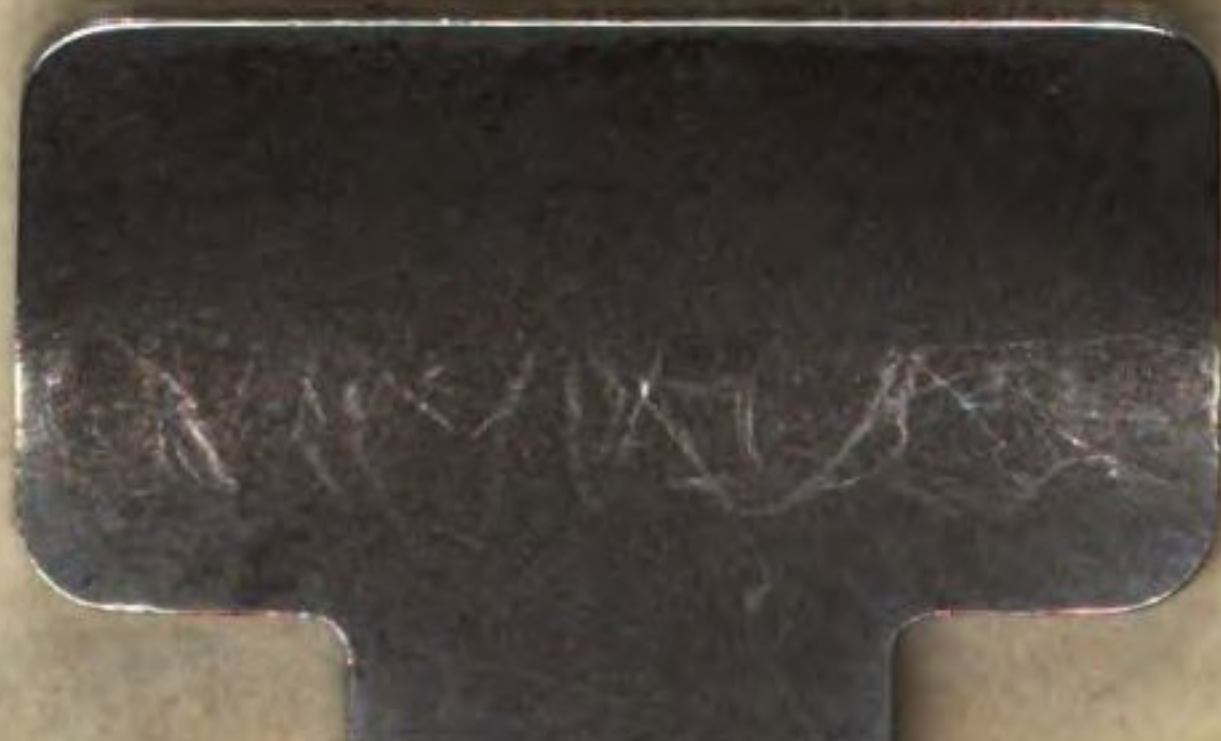




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THE BEAUTIFUL MISS BARRINGTON

BY
HOLME LEE.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

TAUCHNITZ EDITION.

By the same Author,

BASIL GODFREY'S CAPRICE 2 vols.
FOR RICHER, FOR POORER 2 vols.

THE BEAUTIFUL
MISS BARRINGTON.

BY

HOLME LEE,

AUTHOR OF "FOR RICHER, FOR POORER," ETC.

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IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. I.

LEIPZIG

BERNHARD TAUCHNITZ

1871.

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1844-1845

THE BEAUTIFUL MISS BARRINGTON.

PROLOGUE.

SOME histories carry their moral writ so large upon the face of them that all who run may read it. Felicia's is one of these; and yet it is not a common history.

Her portrait as a child appeared in a recent exhibition of modern pictures, and was extolled by connoisseurs as the finest example of a famous painter, lately dead. There was always a crowd before it, for it was, indeed, a glorious work of art, and had a charm for the most careless as for the most critical observer. In the catalogue it was described simply as "Miss Felicia." A last look at the innocent little beauty was a constant wind-up to their day's pleasure with art-lovers who went and went again to the gallery. Amongst them there were doubtless some who sought to know more of this exquisite child when she grew into a woman, and picked up shreds and patches of gossip, stale and untrue, and wondered and pitied at the divine promise blighted in that sweet loveliness. And a

few there must have been who stood at gaze with a personal recollection of Felicia. *Infelicia* perhaps they called her; not discerning her life as a whole: severing her temptation from her deliverance, her peril from her final rescue.

The world is full of guilty tragedies; its ears are greedy for the cruel triumphs of the wicked. Will it have patience for a day with the parable of a woman who withstood the world, the flesh and the devil, and overcame them? For that is the history of Felicia.

CHAPTER I.

Felicia's Portrait.

To begin at the beginning.

Felicia was the daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Barington of Stoneleigh, in Gladeshire. Her father was a man of pleasure from his youth, gay, handsome, lively, agreeable, witty. Her mother was Lucilla Bethell, an only child and an heiress. Yet she was married for love, was a loveable excellent woman, full of salutary influences for all around her. Enviroined by these salutary influences, by every refinement, luxury and comfort that can add grace and dignity to life, their daughter was born (the earnest of sons hereafter) and christened by that name of good omen "Felicia." Sons followed, but not one survived beyond infancy, and at twelve years of age Felicia was the sole child left to her parents, while her mother was become a confirmed invalid, without hope of more to replace those she had lost.

It was at this period that the portrait which has been mentioned was painted. The painter was an enthusiast in his art, and his subject was one to kindle enthusiasm. When he had put the last touches to it, he laid down his palette and pencil exulting, and said with a long-drawn breath: "I shall never better *that!*"

He had set up his easel in the north parlour,

the summer parlour, and thither we had all gone to admire his finished work. It was one of those glowing August evenings when the air is suffused with warm soft light, and the effect of this light on the picture was as the mellow effect of time. Felicia, finally released from the constraint of sitting for her portrait, and most glad of her release, was jumping up and down on her little white satin feet, her white frock and blue sash shaken out, and all her rippled, unbound, golden hair flying far and wide from pearly neck and brow.

"Madcap! pretty witch!" cried her father, and glanced from the lovely copy to the lovelier original with fond, proud satisfaction. Her mother prayed in a tremulous whisper: "God be good to her! God bless and keep her!"

Felicia danced up to the front, curtsied to herself, kissed her hand, and was as wantonly gay as a bird pruning its feathers in the sunshine. Then she danced off, and out of the room, and returned leading by the collar a tall deer-hound to which she was talking with mock solemnity. "Now, Sir Bevis, you are going to behold your sovereign lady and mistress, and to pay her respectful homage," said she, and as the rest fell back, humouring her pretty sport, she held him opposite the picture. What Sir Bevis saw to discontent him, who shall say? but he made a long melancholy whine at the bright image, and then turned his head, and licked Felicia's face. "Oh, naughty, naughty!" cried she, and rubbed her cheek, and the dog pulling to get free, she let him go with a bound out of the window, and would have

gone after him had not her father bidden her stay, and amuse him.

"In every face there is a history or a prophecy." What then was the prophecy of Felicia's? Love, joy, honour, happiness? You would have thought so to see her in everyday temper. And yet the enduring spell of the portrait was not so much in its airy, sunny beauty as in its suggested pathos.

The artist was aware of this. By the subtle instinct of sympathy he had apprehended what spirit wrought in the child's tender brain; a spirit that had already begun to inquire: Why do the flowers fade? why does the grass wither? why do all things that live suffer? and to fall into reveries over the groaning and travailing of the whole creation in pain, and into quaint philosophic doubts concerning the just government of the world. If Felicia had ruled it the roses would have blushed without too vivid heat, the fruit would have swelled and ripened without rain, the being of the creatures would have been a restful balmy content, and her own heart would have been drawn to heaven in love, untried, unbroken.

She had the temperament of genius, that singular and beautiful child. I have many pictures of her in my mind's eye besides that which the artist painted. She was given to "fancying," as her nurse phrased it, to "fancying" in the prettiest, most graceful pantomimic way. She would flit hither and thither waving her arms, her head, her whole lithe supple body in harmony with some aërial music that

none but herself could hear. She characterized the flowers and invested them with an emotional life. She never plucked them for mere idleness. "Let them live, they are happy in the sun," she would say; or gathering them, she would gather them feelingly, and tell them they were going to live again in her mamma's presence, and they must be glad and gladden her. "For we should none of us live to ourselves only," she would explain, as if so they might be consoled. Then she acted impromptu comedies with Sir Bevis; they were abroad hunting the stag, or they were pursuing a recreant knight carrying off an unwilling lady, or they were keeping ward at the Manor gates against an enemy. If she rode out on her pony Stella, here again was opportunity for "fancying." She was riding a race or a challenge, she was fleeing from a flood, a prairie fire, from wolves on a Siberian waste. With servants, with the labouring folk and with the poor she was cordially kind. There were none about Stoneleigh but loved her. She would often have liked to change places, and to bear the burden that she saw others bearing. The hardships of a hard lot touched her long before she understood the compensations with which an all-wise Providence balances the seeming unequal fates of men; and her voice, sweet always, was ever the sweetest when she spoke with those for whom she felt pitiful. She was indeed a dear, good, most affectionate child, but one trembled for her; these sensitive souls have such a capacity for suffering—are apt to make themselves so many miseries.

The portrait was hung in Mrs. Barrington's room, in "mamma's room," as Felicia styled the elegant boudoir adjoining her bed-chamber, where the poor lady's days were henceforward for the most part spent. She could see it as she lay upon her couch, and it made company for her when she could bear none other. I was one of the very few visitors admitted to her privacy after this time, and Felicia grew up in my sight as it were, and in the very core of my heart. Her mother bespoke my kindness for her, my tender watchfulness when her own should be withdrawn, and Felicia learnt to love me from her quite early years.

And now let me offer my credentials as her apologist.

I was a remote cousin of Mr. Barrington's, a poor cousin, who came first to his notice as the young wife of the rector's young curate. The living of Stoneleigh was in the gift of Mrs. Barrington, and after three years of cottage lodgings, on the rector's promotion to a deanery and a fatter benefice, we were promoted to the vacant rectory—for merit more than for kinship, as our dear patroness was pleased to assure us, and as we were best pleased to believe. And our home there we have never exchanged for any other since.

CHAPTER II.

Felicia's Home.

THE church, the manor-house, the village and the parsonage of Stoneleigh were all within hail of each other. That was the fashion of building in the days when it was considered the first duty of the gentry to live on their lands, that the people might be constantly employed, and the poor succoured. Only a road leading to the stables and offices of the manor divided the churchyard from the manor gardens, which were beautiful and extensive. Park there was none. Behind the house rose a steep wooded hill, kept neat with shaded walks for sultry weather, and brilliant with the richest profusion of wild flowers in spring that ever I saw anywhere: it was so old, had been the care of so many generations. The out-look from the rustic seats, set at vantage-points, was over scenery the most English, peaceful, green, cheerful, delightful; over broad pasture-fields, groups of forest trees, a winding wide river, an ancient market-town, dominated by a ruined castle three miles distant across the valley, and over low rounded hills beyond, where the sheep fed by thousands in the summer, and in the winter the snow lay deep and late.

The manor-house itself was one of those picturesque piles of building, irregular and of various dates, that testify to the long peace of English society. The oldest part was at the back, where a stone tablet over the window of the servants' hall bore the date of 1576. The principal rooms were on the south front, and a broad corridor running through the house from east to west, and dividing them from the domestic offices, formed a noble gallery for the Stoneleigh portraits. The house was not too large for comfort, and never having been neglected or given up as a residence since it was founded, it was in perfect order throughout. The library was a charming retreat, rich in fine editions, choice bindings and a thousand signs and memorials of the hereditary taste and learning of the Bethells. Adjoining was the long drawing-room, with two Tudor bay windows bountiful of light, and in a line with it, the music-room. The great dining-parlour westward belonged to the original building, and was a sumptuously carved and decorated chamber. A small ante-room beyond led into what was now the billiard-room, formerly the ball-room, into the north-parlour, and into the flower-garden. Every part was justly proportioned, every room adapted by its cosiness, its cheerfulness or its splendour to its appropriate purpose. There was no other house in the county to compare with Stoneleigh for the characteristics which accumulate about a house that has been for centuries the home of one family, the stage of all its history. Felicia loved it for its own delightsomeness; for its traditions of patriotism, self-

devotion and honour in the men, and of loveliness, piety and purity in the women of her mother's race; she was proud of it, she gloried in it as the noblest part of her inheritance. For already she knew herself as the heiress of Stoneleigh, and was done reverence to as the maiden who must some day be mistress of all.

Every circumstance that surrounds us in youth goes more or less to the making and maturing of character. Felicia was endowed with an ardent joy in beauty, and it was her happy fortune to live in the midst of things beautiful to the eye, and pleasant to the senses; to hear the winds forbidden to blow on her too roughly; to see the stones and thorns taken out of her path; to be nourished and cherished as the centre of many great and tender hopes. Her *happy* fortune, I have written, and let it stand; a girlhood flattered by indulgence, I take to be a really happy fortune: a treasure of sunny memories to look back upon in the winter of discontent, and in the tedious depression of dull days when the clouds return after the rain. I never saw in Felicia any selfishness, any want of considerateness towards those devoted to her service. Petting could not spoil her generous temper. She could be angry in a just cause, for her impulses were true, but she was ever prompt to be reconciled, and it was easy to foresee that for love's sake much would be forgiven her.

Mrs. Barrington was her daughter's only teacher while she lived. She was herself an admirably ac-

complished woman, a fine musician, a sweet singer, a correspondent whose letters her friends were covetous of; skilled with her pencil, her needle, a various and intelligent reader, a very saint in bearing her trials and sufferings. Felicia contemplated her as a pattern of holiness, as the wisest and loveliest lady in the land. All her ambition was to be like her, and a better ambition could not have possessed an ingenuous mind. It made the ways of learning easy to her and very attractive. A seat by her mother's side in that secluded boudoir, a book on her lap, no formal rule, no discipline but the gentle constraint of affection—thus she was trained, and thus she acquired more knowledge of such things as it is pretty and good for a young lady to know than any of her cousins or companions about Stoneleigh. To my mind, there was never one amongst them all who could compare with her!

So much for the sunshine of Felicia's early life. I must speak of its shadows now. For shadows there were, many and deep, brooding within and without her beautiful home, though none had as yet fallen upon her path. In the fulness of time they would stretch to her feet, rise as high as her heart, then cover her head with a veil impenetrable. She had her enviers and unfriends even amongst her kindred, but it was not they who could hurt her. All her sorrows came by those she loved: the cruellest by her father whom she loved best in the world—if love may be measured by sacrifice.

It is hard to put aside prejudice and partiality where we are profoundly interested, but I will en-

deavour to relate Mr. Barrington's part in his daughter's history with as little fear or favour as I show to others, my own blood though he was. The whole was transacted within the limits of my personal observation, and perhaps there was no other witness, without private ends to serve, who knew the circumstances as intimately. Since Felicia's death her papers have also come into my possession, and by their light many incidents that were purposely obscured at the time of their occurrence are made clear. From these papers I may possibly have need to make copious extracts by and by, but for the present I shall proceed by way of narrative.

Mr. Barrington was the younger son of Colonel Barrington of Stitchley, and had held a commission in the Guards until his marriage with Lucilla Bethell raised him above the necessity of a profession. His patrimony, originally insignificant, had been further diminished by his youthful waste, and the great show he made as a chief magnate of Gladeshire was entirely supported on the great fortunes that he had won with his wife. She had brought him Stoneleigh, that fine estate, with a notable residence upon it, and in a popular home-county. His ideas enlarged with his good luck, and he would have pulled the manor-house down to rebuild it on a much statelier plan had not his wife pleaded urgently for its preservation. It was the most ancient dwelling-place of her family; she had been born there, had grown up there, and with a steadfast clinging to what was dear and familiar, she never ceased from her gentle entreaties until she had prevailed with

her husband to let it remain as it was. He condescended at length to oblige her to whom he owed so many obligations, and when the novelty of wealth had worn off, he also began to confess a preference for the mellowed beauties of Stoneleigh, and ended by identifying himself with it as tenaciously as if it were his birth-right.

And the Gladeshire estate, large as it was, was yet but a small part of what Mr. Barrington enjoyed through his wife. The accumulations of a long minority had been paid over to him in hard cash; in the rich fen districts of Lincolnshire, and in the Yorkshire wolds, were fat farms, in Wales were productive mines, and in the county-town were streets of warehouses and shops, built upon land held by lease from the Bethells. And all had devolved on Lucilla as the only child of the late owner:—too much, far too much, she had been heard to say, with a devout wish appended that her poor Uncle Tom had been endowed with a liberal portion out of her superfluity. But she could divest herself of nothing in his favour; and the jealous ill-will that he was pleased to entertain against Mr. Barrington, as the husband of his heiress-niece, operated naturally against her desire to help him in his frequent straits.

I never liked Mr. Tom Bethell; indeed, I think there were but very few people who did like him. He was the most wearisome, fatiguing idle man in society that it was possible to meet. Bred to no profession, he spent his life in desultory waiting about for something to happen that should give him

something to do. In a bachelor this might have been tolerated, but in the father of a dozen children it was contemptible. And all the world knew what he waited for:—he has it now, and therefore one is the less inclined to spare him.

Tom Bethell was still at Eton when his elder brother died, leaving Lucilla, a child of six as his sole heiress. Her person was committed to the custody of her mother, under certain restrictions; as to her fortune she was made a ward of chancery. Tom had no voice allowed in the government of either the one or the other. This was not singular while he was a school-boy; but when he grew to man's estate and found himself excluded from all power and authority over the vast property his succession to which was only barred by the life of one fragile girl, he felt himself deeply slighted and ill-used. Nor did he hide his sense of injury, laying the blame of it upon his sister-in-law, whose influence over his brother had been notorious. The dowager did not let any love be lost between them, and frankly discouraged his visits to Stoneleigh. She professed to be afraid of his envious disposition.

Just before he was of age Tom had married a lady of family and fortune, but fifteen years his senior. He lost her at the birth of a second daughter, and within twelve months he married again. This time his choice fell upon a girl, of parentage no more than respectable, and without a sixpence, but very lovely. Some people counted his marriages amongst his follies. I did not. He married for

love on both occasions, and I never heard that he repented. His second wife was of the same age as his niece Lucilla, who married Mr. Barrington later in the same year, being then just eighteen. The ladies would fain have been friends, but Tom Bethell was so free in his expressions against Mr. Barrington in all companies that it was impossible to keep up a good understanding for long together. And when the Barrington boys dropped off one after the other like untimely fruit, Tom Bethell triumphed visibly; for his own progeny increased and multiplied so fast that he had soon his quiver full, and had no need to be ashamed when he talked with his enemy in the gate.

“If anything should happen to Cousin Felicia, after her mamma, Stoneleigh would be *ours*, you know;” his eldest girl Rosy said to me one day. She spoke as if the idea of “something happening to Cousin Felicia,” with all its agreeable contingencies, had been made quite familiar to her expectation. I was angry, and indulged myself in a sarcastic rejoinder. “What but *death* can happen to ‘Cousin Felicia’ that would promote your wishes? While she lives she is as effectual a hindrance to them as a houseful of sons.” And from that day forward I shared the distrust of Mr. Tom Bethell which animated the dowager, Felicia’s grandmamma.

The terms of the marriage-settlements of Mr. and Mrs. Barrington were never fully known to me, nor perhaps to anybody out of the family except the lawyers; but certain clauses of them became public

later on as matter of dispute with Tom Bethell. There can be no denial that they were very generous as regarded Mr. Barrington. Lucilla had given her gay lover all her heart, and Mrs. Bethell was also most indulgently prepossessed in his favour. It is possible that the writings, as Tom averred, were drawn up under his instructions, but it is highly improbable that they traversed any ulterior rights, or were more than liberally just, the fact considered that the young lady was a ward of chancery. The landed estates were entailed and could not be alienated, but the use or abuse of them was almost unlimited in possession, and Mr. Barrington soon proved himself a master under whom property was not likely to improve, or even to be kept clear of encumbrance. He was, indeed, a lavish spender, and as years went on, his wife had other and grievous troubles besides her loss of children and loss of health. Tom Bethell made these the ground of his animosity against Mr. Barrington; and to give Tom his due, he had but too much right of complaint.

Mrs. Bethell, the grandmamma, a very sprightly, youthful grandmamma, resided at the Dower House, about two miles from Stoneleigh. Her jointure was handsome, and her establishment suitable to her position. She had a humble companion with her, a Miss Reed, one of those meek, supple, obliging characters who nearly always succeed in life to the full measure of their ambition—this ambition rising no higher than to be well-spoken of by their patrons, well-lodged, well-fed, and indolently amused and

comfortable. Her service with Mrs. Bethell was not onerous, but Mrs. Bethell treated her as perfectly invaluable. The lively grandmamma was a prodigious talker, had an irrepressible itch for gossip, for recounting old stories, for discussing her neighbours' business; and Miss Reed was beyond praise as a listener. She was a proser, too, give her the opportunity, and had that trick of general and cautious depreciation which is so welcome to idle folks in an idle hour. I did not love Miss Reed; I know that her soft, busy, qualifying tongue, did much mischief that it never got the discredit of.

Mr. Tom Bethell also had a house not far from Stoneleigh—Ringwood. It had been ever the way with the Bethells to hang together, that they might be a power in their county. But, for the present, Tom did not live there: according to his own showing, could not afford to live there; though others thought he might have done it very well, better than anywhere else, could he have kept on good terms with Stoneleigh and the Dower House. But this his temper would not suffer him to do. So Ringwood was abandoned to the rats and the bats, and the owner of it lived in hired houses here and there, moving about as the fit took him; sometimes to Brighton, sometimes to Bath, sometimes to London—a very expensive method for a man with so large a family, and a method quite subversive of any regular education whether for boys or girls. But then he was for ever expecting that something to happen which would set them all above the world. The young people grew up in the habit of expecting it

too; and the expectation was as bad for them, and not much less delusive than a chancery-suit.

Felicia knew nothing of this: it would not have been right for her to know it. She was large-hearted and generous in the highest degree, and it was enough that her cousins were kindred for her to love them. Her mother instilled into her mind notions of justice also, and set her the example of practical kindness. For let Tom Bethell make himself ever so disagreeable, Mrs. Barrington was resolutely friendly with his wife, into whose private hand many a bank-bill found its way, and many a gift of handsome raiment for herself and her troop of little ones. At the great anniversaries, too, at Christmas, and on every birthday, it was Felicia's duty and delight to send presents to each of her cousins. She began early to understand the happiness of having much in her power, and her mother inculcated the exercise of a wise liberality: the art of giving judiciously, the art of being helpful without encumbering those she helped with patronage, or an irksome sense of obligation. Already, as a child, she was resorted to by the agents and purveyors of local charity.

Mr. Barrington was pleased that his daughter should acquire a general popularity, but he meddled scarcely at all in her education. He had his own concerns, and was much away from Stoneleigh during his wife's later years. They had been accustomed to go to London for the season, and to make their foreign tours together, but from the time her strength began to fail, she remained constantly at home, and he arranged for himself an independent

career of pleasure abroad. He pleaded his constitutional gaiety against the monotony of a country life, and his wife let him leave her, at first, without too anxious a reluctance. But soon rumours of his prodigality became rife in our neighbourhood. One day we heard by chance that the London house was let, and that Mr. Barrington had resumed his bachelor-style of living in club-chambers. Then there was a noise of a great felling of timber in the Yorkshire property, and a loud expostulation from Tom Bethell because young trees were not planted to grow up for the coming generation. "Conscienceless, greedy, wasteful," were the mildest words he had at Mr. Barrington's service.

No one knew where the money went. Stoneleigh was kept up without stint, but its own revenues were more than enough for that; and yet the surplus, with the Yorkshire and Lincolnshire rents, the royalties of the mines, and the town-leases besides, did not suffice for Mr. Barrington's wants, if all was true that was credibly reported. He was said to live with very free society in London, and to be achieving notoriety on the turf. We knew that he never missed his run over to Homburg in the season; and thus, no doubt, much of the old wealth went by a thousand drains into the dead sea of wanton waste, and he had nothing to show for it when it was gone but a bundle of liabilities which he could not redeem, and a few premature lines of care and impatience on his always handsome face.

The way is now, I think, sufficiently cleared by

the introduction of the chief members of Felicia's family and this account of their relative positions when she was verging towards womanhood, for me to narrate the events and circumstances of her life henceforward in their natural sequence and order.

CHAPTER III.

The Great Bethell Oaks.

SOME date to start from is essential to my story: if further retrospects become necessary in its progress, I will take them henceforth as they occur. The date then that I propose is rather more than two years after the painting of Felicia's portrait, when she was between fourteen and fifteen years of age; the occasion Mr. Barrington's return from abroad after an absence of two months.

His arrival was quite unexpected. It was brilliant October weather, and as my custom was of an afternoon, I had gone to the Manor to bear Mrs. Barrington company while Felicia took her daily ride on Stella. We were alone together in the boudoir, talking about the dear child, as I remember, when the echoes of a lively commotion in the hall reached us.

"Can anything have befallen my Felicy?" cried the lady in instant alarm.

"Nothing amiss can have befallen her; for that is her joyous voice," said I, and stepped out on the gallery to see what was the cause of the clamour.

In a moment I discovered that Mr. Barrington was there; for Felicy was in loud glee and rejoicing

over him; she had met him on the road, and had turned back to escort him home. Before I could warn Mrs. Barrington, he was running up the stairs, and Felicity was following at his heels. They had always the tenderest welcome for him. His wife's heart might ache, and often did, but her love suffered no decay; and as for Felicia, she quite adored her papa—had no more doubt of his absolute perfection than she had of his pride and delight in her delicious little self. It is the lot of some men—not always the best of men—to be thus environed by innocent faith and worship.

When he had kissed his wife, Mr. Barrington greeted me: "No need to inquire after your well-being, Cousin Clare, you are always blooming. But how is the rector—how is Gower?" asked he, and shook hands most cordially. He was looking his best for health and handsomeness, and seemed to be in high good-humour. Glad for all sakes that it was so, I came away, leaving the light of content in full glow on Felicia's face, and a soft reflection of her radiance on the poor lady's.

And yet I could not rid myself of a tormenting fear that this sudden, unannounced return home of Mr. Barrington was ominous of evil.

It was on a Saturday morning, a fortnight later, as nearly as I can recollect, that lame Simeon, our gardener, arrested my flower-gathering excursion about the lawn where he was sweeping up the dead leaves of the week to make all tidy for Sunday. With a dolorous shake of his grey old pow, he said:

"Here be news, missis; the gret oaks be a-coming down;" and as he spoke, he cast his eyes upwards to the hill behind the manor and the church, along the side of which extended a double avenue of the most magnificent trees in the country: oak-trees that formed half the beauty of Stoneleigh, and were known and spoken of all round the neighbourhood as the Great Bethell Oaks.

Gladeshire is famous for its fine timber, especially for its oaks and beeches; and of all places in the county Stoneleigh had hitherto maintained its sylvan honours securest. It had never yet been called on to sacrifice them for the redemption of a spendthrift squire or a prodigal son. I also looked up, as Simeon did, to admire the gorgeous autumnal foliage which, seen from a distance, was a crown of glory to the whole village. That it should fall beneath the axe seemed the very recklessness and wastefulness of mischief; for what was the dead wood worth in comparison of the living beauty?

He was a complete parish register, our old man, and when I asked who had given him his information, he halted on his broom, and delivered himself of his story with the spirit and unction that had earned him his repute as annalist of Stoneleigh.

"Benson telled me himself, no longer ago than last night." (Benson was wood-steward at the Manor.) "'Simeon,' sez he, 'we be agoing to lose some o' wer auldest frends. What think ye o' the Gret Bethell Oaks a-coming down?' 'I dunnot believe it,' sez I. 'Believe it, or let alone believing, so it is to be:

so-it-is-to-be,' sez he, twice over, an' very slow, as if the words were bad to get out."

"The village will not look like itself if they clear the hill," mused I aloud.

"Worse luck to Barrington, who's on'y a cuckoo i' Bethell's nest!" muttered Simeon.

"Let us hope that it is all a mistake of Benson's—like the church-yard yew-trees last year."

"It is no mistake o' Benson's: no more wern't the *yewes*; if all be known, it wer my lady that interfered to save 'em. Benson gets powerful stiff in his joints: it is the rheumatism done it—but his mem'ry bean't affected—O dear, no! 'I should ha' wished 'em to ha' stood my time,' sez he, 'but the decree's gone forth:' he's a better scholar nor some, Benson is, an' 'the decree's gone forth,' sez he. Mayhap my lady will interfere again; but if she saves 'em now, it won't be for verra long—not for verra long—we know who's master. An' Miss Felicia, she's on'y a little lass."

I understood well enough what Simeon meant to imply, but I could not bear to think of it. I turned the subject by asking him what was the supposed age of the Great Bethell Oaks.

"They be a good two hundred year old," said he. "I ha' heerd my father tell the tale o' their planting, an' he had heerd it from his father. It was Squire Marmaduke planted 'em in 1649—after the King's head was cut off—King Charles, his head. Squire Marmaduke was one o' the last an' loyalist o' them that stood for the King, an' after they cut off his head, he came home to Stoneleigh quite

heart-broke. He never carried a gun or rode to hounds any more as long as he lived; an' he was that hard dealt wi' while Oliver was King that he was forced to fell every big tree on the estate to pay his fines and compositions. An' then it was he planted the Langhill wi' the Gret Oaks that now is, an' the Beecham copses beyant the river. He died afore the young King came by his own again, on the verra day Oliver died, an' in a tarrible storm, as they tell. Then it wer that the original King Harry's Oak was blowed down—a verra auld tree that stood where the oak we call King Harry's to this day is standing. Squire Reginald, he planted that. For the Bethells never let a tree fall, whether by wind or axe, but they planted another in its room. This man, he plants nought. He an't o' the good auld stock, Barrington an't, an' the pride on it bean't in him."

"Has there ever been one of the Great Bethell Oaks blown down or cut down within your recollection?"

"Never a one has been cut down within anybody's recollection that I know of; but there was two blowed down on the shoulder o' the hill when I was courting my Mary. It was on the Langhill that the lads and lasses who were keeping company walked of a Sunday in the summer-time then——"

"They walk there still, Simeon."

"Aye, aye, they walk there still. I reckon there's not much change i' the fashion o' courting. It was not just summer, for it wer this season o' the year, an' a mort o' leaves o' the grund. Mary an' me

went up after church, for all it was wildish. 'It will be for the last time till spring comes again, Simeon,' sez she. 'An' when spring comes again we shall be married, Mary,' sez I. An' so we was. I lost her thirty-seven years ago come Christmas. But I wer a-telling you o' the two gret oaks that was blowed down. It was that same Sunday night, an' we had been sitting under 'em i' the afternoon. The wind was rising then, and by dark it was awful—as awful, I should say, as that auld September night when Oliver an' Squire Marmaduke gave up the ghost. It was a'most the last act and deed o' Squire Wilfred to set two young trees where they'd fallen. I can't mind that ever I see him again out-o'-doors—but he had a few on us in to bid us good-by afore he died. He wer a real gentleman, like the auld gentleman, his father, wer Squire Wilfred. Mr. Tom's another sort. He might carry all his frends on his back from here to Gladestone, an' not tire wi' his load."

Simeon with a vengeful sweep of his broom added force to his epigrammatic allusion; and having said his say, and got a bitter cud to chew, he bent his poor old limbs to his task again. I returned into the house, and sought Arthur to report to him what I had heard. He was in his study, just applying himself to the revision of a sermon for the morrow; but he laid down his pen, and came out with me when I desired it. He was as incredulous at the moment as I had been, but he realized the likelihood of the menace sooner, and was grieved enough. He knew more of Mr. Barrington's pressing necessities than I did.

We went up the Langhill together from our garden, and spent a beautiful hour in and out under the still thick shadow of the great oaks. Under foot the turf was green and soft as emerald velvet, flecked with drops of gold. A semi-transparent haze, suffused with sunshine, was on the river, the valley, the park-like pastures; the smoke of the village ascended amidst its mossy orchards; nearer below us were the time-and-weather tinted red roofs of the Manor, its grotesque chimney-stacks of stone, the grey old church and churchyard, and our own modest little parsonage, from the secure quiet shelter of which we have seen so many changes since that still October morning. Seek the world round, and I do not believe you could discover a spot more altogether homelike, peaceful, delightful than this Gladeshire village of Stoneleigh!

From the top of the hill we had a cheerful view of the high-road winding for a mile or more between hedge-rows of timber. Many a time have I watched from the height for the coming home of my husband after his brief absences, and of my son since he is grown. The great oaks were a look-out screen for the manor, and indeed for the whole village. Often have I seen Felicia there in the days that are gone.

Arthur recognized our visitor the first. We had both espied a gentleman riding hard on the road in the distance, but the bowery foliage of the manor hid him again until he drew rein at our gate.

"It is Mr. Tom Bethell," said my husband. "We must go down and receive him."

I for my part went with reluctance. It was easy to guess what Mr. Tom Bethell had come about; he always came to us to pour forth his grievances against the manor, to search into its mysteries, and to rail at its misdoings. The peril of the Great Oaks had no doubt reached his long ears. It was a wonder to me how quickly he heard of what was being done, said, and even thought at the manor. Let him be ever so far off, each rumour as it arose flew direct to him, and if it ever so remotely threatened his reversionary interests, home it brought him to his rats' castle at Ringwood, and then to us for inquiry, verification or disproof. But he was rarely misinformed. I imagine that he had some telegraphic wire amongst the upper servants at the manor, though I never knew, or, indeed, sought to know, his medium of intelligence.

As we passed through the wicket upon the lawn Simeon was giving a side-long surly heed to the new-comer's civilities of greeting. So long ago as when Tom was a boy he had got Simeon his discharge from the manor-service because his lame leg, broken and ill-mended, impeded his movements in the stubble when partridges were on the wing. Simeon had been but a day-labourer since, and had suffered so much of hardship that the rancour of his injury had never healed. It was Tom Bethell's policy now to try and stand well with the Stoneleigh folk, but Simeon refused to forget his ancient wrong, and his shrewd wrinkled eyes peered angrily at his adversary still as he lent him an unwilling attention. They had got on the subject of the

Great Oaks, of which Tom was speaking in a tone of regret, assuming that the destruction of them would be a public calamity to the village and not merely a private loss to the manor. But Simeon guessed that Tom was thinking of his own share in the trees (a sentimental share it might seem, but in his secret hopes it was a very material one) and a smile full of maliciousness twisted his dry old mouth as he twice reiterated their sentence of condemnation. Tom turned to us with a lively loud expansiveness of manner, but his vexed countenance was the truer index to his state of mind. Like all the Bethells he was handsome in the face, but his figure was insignificant and his gait ungainly, slouching and restless: as his character was, and as his idle life had confirmed him.

We all went together into my drawing-room—such a tiny room—and as our visitor dropt heavily upon the sofa he cried out against the heat and closeness of it. There was no fire, and one casement was open, but the sun shone in very brightly. Arthur opened the other, and then poor Tom cried out against the draught, and begged that it might be re-closed. All his surface geniality had vanished, and he was quite himself, complaining and denunciatory as usual.

“You know what has brought me over,” he began, plunging at once into his trouble. “Barrington must be mad, or worse than mad, to dream of felling the Great Oaks!”

“You have your information earlier than ourselves. It is only this morning since breakfast that

we have heard there was any such purpose afoot," said Arthur.

"And you believe that it is a serious intention?"

"Simeon was Clare's informant. Not a whisper of it has reached us from any other quarter."

"Simeon quoted Benson as his authority," said I.

"It is true enough, and poor Benson is very low about it. Barrington is capable of sacrificing every tree on the property to gratify his insane vanity. But the Great Bethell Oaks shall *not* come down! I'll go myself to Lucilla. She *must* hinder the desecration. She has the power, and I shall insist upon her exercising it—for Felicia's sake—."

The mention of Felicia was an after-thought, and followed awkwardly on what had gone before. Arthur did not speak. We never presumed to offer Tom Bethell advice, and, indeed, it was not for that he sought us. It was only that he might talk out of the fulness of his heart to two persons who thoroughly understood his affairs, present and prospective. I am not sure that he knew of my cousinship to Mr. Barrington; if he did, he was pleased to talk as though he had forgotten it; and it was not worth while to refresh his memory.

"My poor brother Wilfred never could have anticipated the ruin that is overtaking the property under the monstrous regimen of women!" resumed our visitor after a pause. "The dowager is the silliest woman alive, and Lucilla is almost as weak. It is a vast misfortune for a girl to be very rich. She invariably falls a prey to some good-looking, needy-

scamp of a fortune-hunter. If Felicia live to grow up, mark my words, her fate will be as bad or worse than her mother's."

Now Mrs. Barrington had not been what is called an unhappy or ill-used wife. She had dearly loved her husband, and she loved him to the last. There were in him many amiable qualities, great tenderness of voice and manner, and a courtesy to her that never declined. A harsh word, an unkind look, were quite strange to her experience; and gentleness at home covers many a selfish act beyond its charmed circle, as we all know. Mr. Barrington's habits were too profuse for a man who had all his wealth by his wife, and out of this profuseness arose every grief and vexation that she had to endure through his fault. There are worse ways than this of striking hard upon a woman's heart, and I was prompted to say as much. Tom Bethell did not dare deny it—he could not deny it. But he answered me with a sneer.

"Lucilla adores her slavery—no one ever doubted that. Barrington can do what he pleases with her, and he can manage the dowager—he has proved it often enough. But he may try to go too far with the rest of us. To menace the Great Oaks is to offer an insult to the Bethells past all bearing. What will the manor be, robbed of them? There must be some way of putting a curb on the interloper's extravagance, and by hook or by crook they shall be saved."

"My sympathies go with you in this instance," said my husband mildly.

“The sympathies of every man of sense and feeling in the county *must* be with me!” cried our visitor, gesticulating nervously as he contemplated his injuries. “If it please God that so events should turn, and Stoneleigh revert to me, I should be an embarrassed man all my days. You have no notion how Barrington is encumbering the property. Seventeen years of mal-appropriation and neglect have brought one of the finest inheritances in the kingdom almost to bankruptcy. A generation will not retrieve his iniquities. But nothing, *nothing* yet has provoked me like his insolent menace to the Great Oaks! I hear that he has sold them as they stand—in the lot—bark and timber—just as a man might sell a fir-copse at his son’s majority that he had planted at his birth, to make him a little purse to begin life with!”

It was almost cruel to speak of anything but the one thing that possessed Mr. Tom Bethell’s mind; but the poor angry man was growing livid and tremulous in his excitement, and I was quite thankful to change the subject when Susan announced that luncheon was on the table. As we adjourned to the dining-room, I began to inquire about his wife and children. He had commonly abundance to say concerning them, but now he was short in his answers. Grace was well, and all her little brood were thriving. Rose and Blanche had a new German maid; Rose was a good girl, and well-disposed to the young fry: Blanche was foolish, and would give him some trouble, he feared, before she would be wiser.

"There it is again, you see," he continued, with a revival of vehemence. "Those two girls have their fortunes from their mother, quite independent of me. At one-and-twenty they are free as air—may marry the first penniless adventurer who takes their fancy. They are not such catches as their cousin Felicia, but they have more than enough to entice men for their money's sake. Gracie's girls, poor souls, won't have sixpence to help them to husbands, and what I shall do when the boys want to go to school, the Lord only knows! I suppose we shall have to live at Bedford or Tunbridge to take advantage of a cheap grammar-school—those refuges for destitute fathers and widowed mothers of superfluous sons."

"Your boys might do worse than have their education at Bedford or Tunbridge," said Arthur.

"Very true. I believe it is much the same as at Eton—only we Bethells have always been Etonians. This is where it is—we want a radical reform in the laws of property. Wilfred and I were equally my father's sons, but he had the luck to get ten years' start of me into the world—that's all. Yet think what has devolved on a woman merely because she is Wilfred's daughter, and must devolve on a woman again because she is Wilfred's gran'daughter, while my four boys may emigrate to the colonies, or work for a living at home, or loaf about and starve. It is not justice, no, and it is not common sense! Land ought to be settled exclusively on male heirs. It is not to be tolerated that a woman should carry off all the estates of an ancient family tacked to her

petticoat, to enrich an alien: and it will not be tolerated much longer either, when there are male representatives surviving.

Once embarked in a discussion of the laws of primogeniture poor Tom Bethell never knew where to stop. The end of luncheon did not release us from his burdensome company. It was four o'clock when he suddenly broke the tangled thread of his discourse, and said that *now* he might present himself at the Manor. Mrs. Barrington was to be seen of an afternoon, if ever, and he was resolved not to go away from Stoneleigh until he had set her duty as a Bethell towards the Great Bethell Oaks uncompromisingly before her. And then, all in a hurry, he left us.

It is not very material what passed at the interview between Mr. Tom Bethell and his niece, for a tragical event that befel in the course of the next week averted for a time the mischief that he had come over to declaim against. This event forms a memorable epoch in the annals of Stoneleigh.

Both lame Simeon and Tom Bethell, in speaking of the cutting-down of the Great Oaks, had referred to Benson, the wood-steward, as being very "low" about the task laid upon him; but neither Arthur nor I gave the expression any heed until Sunday morning after service, when we saw the old man in the churchyard. He was sitting on the wall against our garden, with his face set towards the hill, and when we asked him how he did, he muttered a few half articulate words, to the effect that his head was bad, and the world was all going

round with him. Arthur invited him to come in and dine with our servants, and he spent the afternoon dozing by the fire.

"It will do him good," cook said, "for he was in a sad taking about the Great Oaks."

Arthur had some talk with him before he left, and said to me: "Clare, we must keep an eye on Benson. He is far from well. Mind, I go or send to-morrow for Dr. Fowler to see him."

Dr. Fowler came, and reported nothing seriously amiss. The wood-steward was about in the village all the day, which passed over without any marked incident.

I had not been to the manor since the previous Friday. I had been deterred from going by a fear lest I might intrude on a distress that I could not mitigate. Mrs. Barrington never sought for relief to her burdened mind in complaint against her husband; she was loyal to him to her last breath; but she would talk much and anxiously of the future of their daughter, and Felicia was all her theme when next I saw her. She sent for me, with an invitation to afternoon tea on the Tuesday—the third day after lame Simeon had announced the condemnation of the Great Oaks—and I went.

The poor lady was lying on her couch in her usual place when Carr, her maid, led me up to the boudoir. Felicia also was in the room, standing at the oval window—a small window, set in an angle of the wall, which framed a lovely picture of the Langhill, where it sunk down into the valley on the west. She was making a study in water-colours of

the evening autumnal sky-tints—glowing red and purple and dusky gold behind the Great Oaks, marshalled on the slanting-ridge to the hill-foot. There, the formal avenue was broken into clumps and single trees, dotting the pasture-fields to the brink of the river. She brought it to me for my opinion. It was very prettily done; there was real feeling in it. Some expression of herself penetrated all that Felicia did. And I remember how lovingly her mamma listened to her art-prattle, how lovingly her eyes lingered on every movement and gesture of her darling as she went about afterwards, putting by her books, her painting-gear, and other appliances of her day's-lessons.

Carr brought in tea just as she had finished, and she asked if she might stay and pour it out for us: a request that be sure was granted. Was there anything her mamma could have denied her? but then the dear child never asked anything amiss. At last, she went out, and as her voice, breaking into a song, died away in the distance of the house, Mrs. Barrington began to speak.

“Cousin Clare, I have something to say to you—come a little closer: I am tired, and talking hurts me, but I must not let another day pass—for who can tell what may happen to-morrow! I have had a strange heaviness on me since Saturday, and Dr. Lloyd looks grave: I caught Carr crying this morning too, and I was at no loss to understand why when she pretended to be more than commonly cheerful. As if they could deceive me! Alas, I know that my life draws towards its end!”

Ah, how regretful was her voice! The tears were in her eyes, and in mine. I could not utter a word. She continued to speak clearly and freely, though her countenance was full of emotion.

“When I am gone, they will give you a letter in which I have set down a few of my wishes about Felicity. I *wish* it had been God’s good pleasure to spare me a year or two longer for her sake—but I will not repine! It is a comfort to me to leave you at the rectory:—promise me, Cousin Clare, that you will never let my Felicity want for the counsel and countenance of a friend while you live?”

“I never will,” said I with fervent purpose. She had laid this pledge upon me many times before, but never, I think, so solemnly.

“After *you*, I trust Carr and Janet to be good to my child. My husband has given me his word that, so far as it depends upon him, those two excellent young women shall be continued always in her service. They are sisters, and more faithful, fond hearts my sweet darling can never attach to her.—I dare not say that I *fear* for her; I trust God for her, as for all else; but, as my poor Uncle Tom preaches, it is a perilous lot for a girl to be very rich. If I were sovereign, I would rule that no woman should inherit a fortune of more than five thousand pounds, and then she would escape the danger of being either loved or hated for her money. But I cannot alter what is. Felicia must step into my place—Heaven grant that it may be no more difficult to her than it has been to me. But, Cousin Clare, it will, *it will!*”

This presentiment, as I perceived, gloomed very darkly on the dying lady's mind. What had been often painful as between husband and wife, would be cruel, as between father and daughter; and the mother foresaw that the weaker, more loving warm nature would have to suffer and endure. Well! it is by suffering the saints are purified: out of endurance that they are made strong.

Her thoughts diverged by-and-by to simpler and nearer concerns. The far future she must leave, must let go out of her hands; but there were things of the time present that she could speak of with expectation that her desires might prevail. One charge in particular she gave me.

"If Felicity must have any lady set over her at the Manor, any companion by way of *chaperone*, let it not be my mother's factotum, Miss Reed. I cannot say this to my mother, who believes in her, but I say it to you, Cousin Clare, who are not so easy to hoodwink. If any one is proposed, it will be Miss Reed—and Felicity does not love her—reason sufficient for keeping them apart. Janet and Carr, who are sagacious and true as the daylight, are jealous of her with a singular repugnance, and I myself have no faith in her principles, and shrink from her purring flattery. I rely on you to resist her introduction into this house, if ever it be suggested."

I signified my acquiescence. Apparently my quiet distaste for Miss Reed was not a prejudice peculiar to me. Mrs. Barrington felt it more personally and distinctly, whose opportunities of de-

ciphering her character had been twice as frequent and intimate as mine.

I cannot recollect that anything further of importance was spoken of between us on this occasion.

The Great Oaks were not mentioned.

As I took my way home across the churchyard, I looked up to the twilight shades upon the hill whence the sunset glories were all departed, and was just a thought surprised to see coming down slowly a cluster of figures carrying a burden. I cannot say that any terror or foreboding was upon me, though I stayed in the porch outside to watch them. A minute or two, and I recognized Arthur amongst the bearers of the heavy load, then lame Simeon. They came towards the wicket that communicated with our garden, and I advanced a few steps till Arthur signed to me to go back—to go indoors. I knew then that what they were carrying was the lifeless body of a man.

I averted my eyes. A score of dismal possibilities coursed through my mind. Who was it? Susan met me in the passage, with a scared face.

“It is poor Benson, ma’am,” said she, and lifted her apron to her eyes. The girl was trembling all over. Something dreadful had happened.

I sat down in the drawing-room, and waited for Arthur. It was nearly an hour before he appeared. It seemed like three. I was about to ask him if the old man was dead, when he stopped my mouth

from inquiry by saying: "Hush, Clare—he was surely out of his mind when he did it."

The end of that sad day's work was a coroner's inquest, a funeral, much ghastly whispered talk and a reprieve for the Great Bethell Oaks. But the village sweethearts have never walked on the Langhill on summer Sundays since that fatal afternoon; and it is commonly reported amongst the superstitious gossips that the place is haunted.

CHAPTER IV.

In the Winter Weather.

IT was Christmas, and there was deep snow upon the ground when the next memorable event befel at Stoneleigh. The Manor pew was full that day at morning-service. Mrs. Bethell and Miss Reed had come over with visitors from the Dower House, and Mr. Barrington was there with Felicia. Besides these appeared the ruddy round brown face of George Sylvester who was at home from Eton for the holidays. He had walked all the way from Bylands through the snow, he told me afterwards. Bylands was four miles off, and George, being his father's third and youngest son, had no mount of his own, and cheerfully rode Shank's nag when he could not borrow one. He was a favourite at the Manor. He had once had an accident with his gun in the woods near, and they had nursed him there till he was recovered. Since then Felicia and he had called each other by their names, like brother and sister, and Mrs. Barrington always spoke of him as "George."

In the course of the afternoon, while Arthur was reading to me, Miss Reed stole in on our quiet fireside entertainment—literally, *stole in*; for a low

tap on the window-pane was our first warning of her, and the next minute she entered the drawing-room unannounced, except by herself.

"I thought I should take you by surprise," said she, assuming that the surprise must be surely a delight. She had an impertinent familiarity of manner that I could with difficulty tolerate, but no coldness had any effect in discouraging her airs of intimacy. She accepted the chair Arthur offered her, and inquired how we did with all the cordiality of a dear friend.

"How welcome is the presence of those we love at this season! and how have you both been lately? There has been sad trouble at Stoneleigh since last we met—has there not? I have longed to see you, but you know how very, very seldom I can be spared, and will have excused me—I wish everybody was as indulgent! But this morning while I was dressing, I said to myself: 'The afternoon will be an opportunity—at the Manor, Mrs. Bethell will have her daughter and her sweet Felicia, and I shall run across to the Rectory, and spend a salutary hour with the good rector and his nice little wife.' And pray how is the baby, the darling boy, the precious, wee Johnny? I must not forget the baby! It would never do to forget the baby, would it?"

Miss Reed's interest in our nursery being appeased, the "good rector," with a sportive malice, told our visitor that his "nice little wife" would be happy in her charming society, but, for himself, he was afraid he must relinquish the pleasure of it; for he had to give a short service in the school-room at

half-past three for the sake of a few old cottagers who could not get up the hill to church in bad weather. And then away he went—full ten minutes earlier than he need have gone. In fact, Arthur distrusted himself when exposed to Miss Reed's inquisitorial ways; he said it required the tact of another woman to fence with her dexterously enough to avoid coming to a fight *à outrance*; and so he left her to me.

Nothing is more odious to me than the affectionateness of a person I dislike. Alone with me, Miss Reed was affectionate both in word and deed. The door had hardly closed upon Arthur, when she was impelled to rise from her seat, to lay hold of my two hands with a tender vehemence, and then to kiss me. Her effusiveness abated as suddenly as it had risen, but instead of throwing me off my guard, as it was meant to do, of opening my heart and relaxing my lips, it only provoked me to caution, and doubled my wariness. At that moment I should have enjoyed a quarrel with her—but Arthur had bound me over to keep the peace. He considered her a dangerous woman, and kept her as distant as he was able, without committing himself to the risks of a breach—which, besides, would have been as unseemly, in our position, as it would have been perilous.

I invited my visitor to take her warm velvet bonnet off while she stayed, and her compliance was immediate. "I will, dear, for the weight incommodes me," said she; and suiting the action to the word, she laid her fashionable head-gear in

Arthur's empty chair, and revealed to my observation a neat skull-cap of net, with an opening behind for her scanty knot of yellow hair to come through, and a space in front wide enough to admit a tier of gauzy curls. She was very ugly, the worst of her ugliness being the clay-blue leathery tint and texture of her skin in contrast with her yellow hair. Her eyes were greenish-grey, the brows and lashes redly defined; for the rest, her features were large and strongly marked. She was a woman whom you might hate easily, but whom, if you undertook to despise her, you must despise with a latent dread. For the lips that could kiss and purr with carneying enthusiasm could open and shut in savage, biting words, and under that stolid exterior there burned a restless, envious, bitter, cruel heart. God forgive *me* if I wrong her! God forgive *her* if I have interpreted her subtle secret arts and acts aright! When I remember certain things I can hardly keep a curb on my indignation——

But I will go back to that Christmas afternoon when we sat by my drawing-room fire, and she talked of the people at the Manor as one who belonged to them by use and custom, by love and ties of gratitude and loyalty.

“Of course, dear, I am at home in the family. Mrs. Bethell has no concealments from me, and seeks my advice on all occasions. ‘What would *you* do, Reed?’ is for ever on her lips; and when the advice is as between two whose interests are opposed, it is my endeavour to hold the balance

even, and to help her to decide justly. It is a responsibility, a grave responsibility, but I do not shrink from it—one ought not to shrink from the serious duties that may arise in a long service. Seventeen years ago, when I went to the Dower House, the excellent dowager would have taken me up pretty sharply had I dared to offer an opinion on matters the most trifling: but it is different now, very different now. She feels that her world is my world: that all my devotion and desires are linked with her own and with those of the Bethells. And I am proud to feel that I have the good-will of the whole circle; Mr. Tom has a gracious word for me always, and even Mr. Barrington never passes me without a civil inquiry after my health. It is much to say, dear Mrs. Gower, that two gentlemen who are at daggers-drawn between themselves, should make a point of being friendly in their behaviour to me. I am inclined sometimes to lay it all to the account of their value for dear Mrs. Bethell, and then again I think they have discerned that I am a useful, unobtrusive person, with a few simple virtues of my own, which keep things smooth in the family, where (you know it as well as I) there are many elements of discord ready to break out into open and violent contention.”

I had nothing to reply to this flux of platitudes, so I held my tongue; and after a pause of musing meditation, accompanied by a gentle deprecating movement of her head and a dry twinkling of her eyes, Miss Reed continued her monologue; the drift of which, I began to perceive, was to impress me

with a sense of her own vast consideration and importance at the Dower House and at the Manor.

“The Great Bethell Oaks now—I daresay it never occurred to you that I had a hand and voice in staying their destruction?”

It certainly never had.

“All the world of hereabouts supposes that Mr. Barrington spares them, daunted by the wretched old wood-steward’s having hanged himself on the Langhill. Nothing of the sort! Mr. Barrington is not a man to be deterred from a bad purpose—from any purpose—by another poor creature’s calamity: indeed, I know it for a fact that he said Benson’s suicide was a reason the more for their coming down—and down assuredly they would have come, if he had had his will of them. It is not necessary to remind you how adverse Mr. Tom Bethell was; I never witnessed a man more angry—more *righteously* angry, I may say. He saw Mrs. Barrington, he saw Mr. Barrington, and spoke his mind without compromise; he even laid the burden on darling little Felicia, who quite entered into his sentiments, and he came finally to the Dower House, to plead there. ‘What do *you* think, Reed?’ the dear dowager asked me in her perplexity. ‘It is *impossible* that Stoneleigh should be robbed of its noblest ornament to pay the debts of an *alien*,’ said I, and that was the last word of the whole matter. Mr. Tom Bethell was present, and thanked me with much emotion. ‘Miss Reed, you speak like an honest woman, and a woman of courage’—that was what he said. And I had the approval of my own con-

science too. The dowager talked to her poor daughter, and Mr. Barrington was denied the authority he wanted to fell the trees; they were as safe as ever they were in their lives when that miserable Benson——Yes, yes, you shrink from a repetition of the sad history, and well you may! Let us have done with it, and pass to a pleasanter subject. How do you think the dear lady at the Manor is? I had not the honour of seeing her at luncheon. She sent for that cub, George Sylvester, but after her little interview with him, she felt herself too tired to receive me. ‘She must defer it to another occasion,’ was the message.”

I replied that the poor lady was fast wearing away—that her present sickness was for death, I feared.

“One does not like to contemplate it—she is still a young woman—not forty yet. It will make a wonderful change at the Manor—is it known whether Mr. Barrington will continue to reside there?”

I could not gratify my visitor’s curiosity even by a speculation. I was gazing into the fire, but was conscious nevertheless of her eyes gleaming and peering inquisitively into my face. Miss Reed gave me credit for being a “nice little woman,” but if she had expressed her whole mind concerning me she would have added that I was a rather silly little woman. She was one of those people so excessively wise in their own conceit that they overlook the possible sagacity of their neighbours, and darken their own really shrewd perceptions by contempt for other folks’ discernment. I am sure that it never

occurred to Miss Reed that I might be acute enough to see through her—and probably I was not on all occasions; but I saw through her clearly now when she went on to say that “the sweet and lovely Felicia,” deprived of her mamma, would be too young yet by many a year to take upon her the dignity of Lady of the Manor.

“It would be essential that she should have about her a gentlewoman of experience and tact, for oh! what snares are spread for the unwary in these self-seeking days!” cried she, with a moral air.

“I imagine that the perils of an heiress are much the same as they always were,” said I.

“Ah, my dear Mrs. Gower, you are so innocent of the world! The dear dowager will never be drawn from the agreeable seclusion of the Dower House at her age; but she is sensible how carefully Felicia will need to be guarded in the budding years of her life, poor sensitive darling! She was good enough to observe to me the other day, ‘Who could be fitter for that delicate office than myself—bound up as I am in every thought and feeling with the family?’ I have reason also to believe that Mr. Tom Bethell regards me as the one suitable person——”

“Is it not a little premature to discuss these arrangements?” I interrupted.

“They will have to be discussed—I may even venture to say that they have been discussed already. To remain at the Dower House would please me best; but if the sacrifice of going to the Manor to take charge of dear Felicia be required of me, I trust that I shall be able to make it in a right spirit.”

"It is very unlikely that it will be required of you," said I, not unwilling to dissipate a vain hope.

Miss Reed coloured, and glanced at me keenly. "What do you know? Is it determined that I shall not be offered the appointment?" she asked, in a sharp, surprised voice.

This was one of her direct queries, such as threw Arthur into perplexity. To answer it was to violate a confidence, to refuse to answer it was to acquiesce in what it assumed. I was vexed, and did not refrain from showing it, which served for the occasion better than word-fencing. With the curt impatience of a woman provoked, I told her that I would not talk of the private affairs of the Manor, and especially that I would not talk of matters contingent on an event which would bereave me of one of my best and dearest friends.

She was rather confounded, and answered me with eager deprecating good-humour; perceiving, perhaps, that she had overshot her mark. "I wish everybody in your situation was gifted with the like discretion, and the like sympathy, dear Mrs. Gower. You are so kind that I need not beg of you to make allowance for the anxiousness of a poor dependent. It is true that my comforts at the Dower House are many, but the *honorarium* is very small, and I have the future to provide for." Here she was silent and crestfallen, and the interest of her visit seemed to be gone.

She sat on, however, till the edge of dark, and only made a movement to depart, when the front door was opened hastily, and somebody with a

quick resounding step came into the hall. It was not Arthur, for the step halted and hesitated, and then a boyish voice that I knew cried out half-diffidently, "Mrs. Gower, Mrs. Gower! where are you? You are wanted!"

"It is that young Sylvester. What can his errand be?" said Miss Reed.

I opened the drawing-room door, and there was George, red and hurried. "Come, come quickly—to the Manor—come as you are—they sent me to bring you," stammered he in painful excitement. His hands shook as he lifted a plaid of Arthur's from a nail in the passage, and wrapt it about me.

"Is anything the matter? Has anything happened?" asked Miss Reed. "Wait for me one minute! I'll go with you—*do* wait!" she vociferated with breathless energy.

"*You* are not wanted—we cannot wait," said George, and heedless of her pitiful beseechings, he hurried me out into the winter dusk to obey my summons. No need had I to inquire what it meant.

I can still see the gloomy shadow of the Langhill, and of the Great Oaks against the sky: I can still feel the crisp cold airs that trembled in the churchyard yews, and hear the loud, moaning gusts in the avenue, when I recall that tramp in the dusk through the snow to the Manor. The bye-paths had not been swept, and we went the shortest way. Of late days a certain negligence had prevailed in the household rule, as if everybody waited, expectant of

an event. And now the event was here. George told me as we were going that all at once the change had come, that Mrs. Barrington was dying, and had called for me. The house was not yet lighted up when we arrived; several servants stood about in the hall, and Janet was on the watch for me.

"There is no time to spare," she said, as she conducted me upstairs. "Already I am afraid it is too late."

We paused a moment at the chamber-door that I might collect myself, and then went in.

It was too late. I never heard the voice of my friend again in articulate words. She knew me, but she was speechless. All those whom she most loved were there. Her mother was sitting at the head of the bed, half-hidden by the curtain, her husband stood full in her view and Felicia was kneeling with her face buried against the pillow. Janet and Carr were present besides, and the light in the room was only from the fire, and from a shaded lamp through the door ajar of the boudoir beyond it.

Consciousness survived the power of expression. The whitening lips moved as with an effort to utter, but no sound issued from them. We guessed at the name of George Sylvester; but could not be sure of it. The boy was outside in the gallery, crying as he had cried when his own mother was taken. Janet brought him in, and the lady's eyes rested on him for a minute, then turned as in search of some other person.

"It is you, Felicia," said the boy, shaking her

gently by the shoulder. She stood up and leant against him.

At this instant entered Arthur—I know not where he had been to come so late. He spoke a few words, and we all knelt while he recited the prayers for the dying. As his voice ceased in the beautiful benediction, Carr opened the door, and we went out from the presence of the dead, weeping.

And yet it was a happy death—a death to be desired; painless, peaceful, blessed in the love of family and friends—and most blessed in the love of Christ our Saviour.

The first figure that met my view in the gallery was Miss Reed, and with the grotesque incongruity of thought which is often the rebound of overstrained solemn feeling, I noticed her rueful countenance under her velvet bonnet all awry; and our conversation at home recurred to me with the reflection that now the dear mistress was gone, it would be the policy of the humble companion to worm herself into the manor as Felicia's duenna, and that it must be my policy to defeat her machinations.

I hated myself for having such thoughts at such a time, but our hearts and minds are fearfully and wonderfully made, and others of us besides Charles Lamb may be inclined to laugh at a funeral, and yet not be destitute of natural feeling and affection.

CHAPTER V.

The young Lady of the Manor.

I WILL not linger on the details of this sad period. Mrs. Barrington was buried, not in the family vault below the chancel, but outside the walls of the church under the east window, that her husband might be buried by her when his time came. This was one of the requests of a letter which was left for him together with one for her daughter, and that she had said awaited me. It is not necessary that I should record her instructions in this place. They related in chief to Felicia, and were a repetition of what she had often spoken; but, of course, the wishes set down by the hand of the dead mother would carry more weight and authority with everybody than my unwritten recollections could be expected to do.

The funeral was attended by every gentleman member of the Bethell family, near and remote in kinship, and they mustered a considerable clan of distant cousins when they were all assembled together. After they had dispersed again the Manor was left for six months in solitude. Mr. Barrington asked nobody's leave, but carried his daughter out of England, with Janet in attendance upon her, and they

travelled through France and Italy, halting for a few days or weeks at a time, first in one city and then in another, until they came to Naples. Here Felicia had an attack of fever, and when she was recovered, her father brought her home by short stages through Switzerland and the Rhenish Provinces, and reappeared with her at Stoneleigh soon after midsummer. She was grown, and the touch of sun on her splendidly fair complexion, I thought an improvement to her beauty;—but she was still the girl—nothing yet of the woman about her.

I received many letters from Felicia during her absence abroad, but none, I think, of importance sufficient to be quoted. She was of a sweet happy temper, and had fewer disappointments and drawbacks in her minor pleasures than most of us can boast, but her account in her correspondence of what she saw and did was only in outline. She had confessed, however, to having set up a diary on the plan of one that her mamma had kept, and this volume, richly bound and gilt, she displayed to me at our first meeting. It was no depository of fine imaginings and tears, but a chronicle for anybody's inspection: a large quarto with illustrations in water-colour of picturesque scenery bits and autograph notes of travel, study, meetings and partings, and the myriad incidents which are trivial in themselves but note-worthy on the road. This diary with pen and pencil Felicia continued at intervals as long as she lived. It lay on a table in the boudoir to which she had succeeded as her own room, and probably most of her friends at one time or another have

looked through it. I have it now, and preserve it as the truest, tenderest relic of that true and tender persecuted soul.

It was not to be supposed that Mr. Barrington would live at Stoneleigh more constantly now than he had done during his wife's lifetime; and not a month had elapsed since his return from abroad, when we heard that he was going to take a trip to Homburg again. I immediately asked myself: And how about Felicia?

The dear girl came to me one morning in pouting, whimsical distress.

"Cousin Clare, papa wants to talk to you about me," she announced. "Grannie has been saying that if he leaves me here, I must have a duenna or go to school. I shall never go to school; mamma did not wish it. If *you* might be my duenna, I'd fall into love and allegiance on the spot; but Grannie proposes Miss Reed—isn't it dreadful? I know I should hate her! O! if pappy would but stay at home, how merry could I be with him for duenna! But my message is that he is coming to consult you—at eleven o'clock—if you can see him."

Certainly I could, and I promised Felicia to be her advocate.

At the appointed time Mr. Barrington came. He was in a sprightly gay mood, and made no sign of sorrowful or sentimental recollections. Nor was his mourning obtrusive in his apparel.

"I invited Felicy to be present at our council, but she preferred to stay outside with Oscar and Sir

Bevis. She told you, however, the burden of my complaint, Cousin Clare?" he began.

"Yes—and of her own: banishment to school or a duenna—and the duenna Miss Reed," said I. "So let me speak plainly at once, and tell you, if you are not aware of it, that one of the charges Felicia's mother laid on me was to oppose Miss Reed's promotion to any post of authority over her daughter, if such should ever be proposed. Both by word of mouth, and in her farewell letter to me, Mrs. Barrington was very earnest in this matter."

"I wonder why?" said my visitor with an air of musing. "Reed seems an inoffensive creature, though sinfully ugly for a woman. But my wife had infinite discernment; I shall certainly not act contrary to her wishes in so delicate a business. Felicity dislikes her too, and tells me frankly that if she must have a companion, she would prefer somebody younger, prettier and livelier—quite natural that, and reasonable too. Well, Cousin Clare, can you name any fit person? for I cannot remain a prisoner at Stoneleigh all the year round, and the young Lady of the Manor, as I find the people have dubbed her, cannot be left quite alone with Carr and Janet, worthy good bodies as I know they are."

Now I had a certain person in my mind, a perfectly suitable person, and very near to myself: my eldest sister, a widow without children, whose husband, an officer of engineers, had died in India two years before. Helen was still young—not more than twenty-eight—and she was also accomplished, cheerful, sensible, and knew the world. Mrs. Bar-

rington had manifested a decided partiality for her, and so had Felicia, during a long visit that Helen had paid us at the Parsonage on her return alone from India. She was now living at Gladestone, solitary and impoverished. I regretted her close connection with myself, but after a minute's further thought and hesitation on that score, I mentioned her. Mr. Barrington caught at the idea.

"Your sister Helen—Mrs. Gresham? Cousin Helen—the very woman, and thank you, Cousin Clare! So vanish a hundred difficulties! She is a lady at all points, and as having been married, and seen something of this wicked world, she will be a proper dragon for my beautiful nymph. They can find nothing to say against her at the Dower House—but, if only for courtesy's sake, we must go through the form of consulting Mrs. Bethell, particularly as she has recommended Reed."

I agreed to that, as of course, and invited Helen to come over to the Parsonage. I was not, however, so sure as Mr. Barrington had shown himself that nothing would be found to say against her at the Dower House, though I scarcely anticipated the storm of wrathful indignation that actually resulted from my licensed interference.

Of her own mind, it is my belief, that the dowager would have acquiesced in Helen's appointment as the very best that could be made. Felicia was glad of it, her papa was glad of it, and at the first mention Mrs. Bethell herself said: "Yes, I think it would be very nice, if it could be arranged. The dear child has taken to her, you say? and being a sort of cousin,

her position in the neighbourhood will be pleasanter. Nobody can object to receive her, or to meet her.—Now poor Reed is not that kind of person, though she does very well for me, and I should, on the whole, be sorry to lose her.” This was when the grandmamma had not her factotum at her elbow; before anything had been promulgated beyond the Parsonage concerning Helen, and before her arrival there.

The dowager carried the news home, and the very next day she was at the Manor again, but with quite another story. “A handsome young widow who was certain to marry again at the earliest opportunity was not, on second thoughts, the most desirable of watch-dogs—why she would need a watch-dog herself! In fact, there was a degree of impropriety on the face of the thing that would set all the world talking: and how bad, how deeply injurious that would be for poor little innocent Felicia!”

These notions were none of Mrs. Bethell’s, were too contemptible to merit refutation. Yet the moment was critical, and I said, “Wait till you have seen Helen; a very brief acquaintance will convince you of the dignity of her character. Mrs. Barrington knew and approved her. She has the self-respect of a true woman, and a true lady. Your fears for her are groundless.”

“I will talk to Reed about it again: she may modify her opinion,” replied the dowager. “Yesterday she was shocked beyond measure, and convinced me that it would never do.”

“What concern is it of Miss Reed’s?” I rejoined. “Except that she must lose the appointment, if Helen gain it, she has no personal interest in the matter.”

“And is not that interest enough to excuse a little prejudice against a rival candidate? Besides, you forget her attachment to the family, her long devotion to myself.”

I did not forget them, I only did not believe in them. This, however, I would not plead, nor did I wish to bring forward Mrs. Barrington’s letter, if Miss Reed’s ambition could be defeated by other means. To vex and insult her, to make an enemy of her for myself, and perhaps for Felicia, by letting her know how much she was disliked and distrusted by Felicia’s mother, was a step that I felt anxiously desirous to avoid. Mr. Barrington, I was sure, would say nothing of his wife’s private wishes expressed to me—expressed to me only, as I conjectured, that Miss Reed might not be wantonly injured in the esteem of those who had for so many years been satisfied with her service; but to reveal them to the dowager would be to reveal them to the whole world—she would go straight to her factotum with every word: and therefore I kept back my strongest argument to be employed only in the last resort—and then, if requisite, to be employed in its full force.

Mrs. Bethell left me on this second occasion more than half of my way of thinking again. On the morrow Helen arrived at the Parsonage, and Mr. Barrington had some conversation with her—not quite satisfactory. I remember Helen remarking to me afterwards that he must be either a very weak man,

or embarrassed by circumstances which disabled him from pursuing his own will steadily.

"He is *limp*," said she. "Now I like clear, incisive action in a man."

The fact was that the dowager had talked to him also, and not without effect. One sentiment she had propounded (I have no doubt it was put into her mouth) which had taken peculiar hold of him, and had quite paralysed his original resolution. "It ought not to be said that you have surrounded Felicia with a clique of your own relations: or we shall have a Bethell faction rising up against the Barrington faction—I am not sure that there is not one rising up already."

"I desire nothing but to live at peace with my neighbours," was his answer to the insinuation, so insulting to his honour, that he was not fit to be entrusted, unwatched, with even the guardianship of his own child. He did not resent it—perhaps he did not dare resent it. He knew best.

There was a greater amount of talk expended over the selection of a duenna for the young lady of the Manor than over any event that had occurred in our neighbourhood since the last election for the county. Mr. Barrington grew sadly impatient of it, so impatient that I could see he was ready to succumb before the pressure of the Dower House, and put in Miss Reed.

"I cannot be kept dawdling here all the summer—this business must be settled out-of-hand now," he said, almost angrily at our last council of three upon it, held in the library at the Manor, present

himself, the dowager, and myself. The dowager spoke next.

"No third person has been proposed or thought of; the choice lies where it has done from the beginning: between Reed and Mrs. Gresham. Reed has my entire confidence, and I vote for her. Mrs. Gresham is a most charming and clever woman, but there are disadvantages in her case impossible to be overcome."

"Then Reed let it be. I have no objection I'm sure!" exclaimed Mr. Barrington, stretching his arms across the table with a fatigued air of resignation and relief.

"A moment's indulgence," said I, and produced my letter. It had become imperative. I think that Mr. Barrington had lost sight of his wife's wishes by this time; for he started, looked annoyed, and then, with a sort of stifled groan, bade me read the letter. I read the whole paragraph relating to the humble companion.

The dowager stared in consternation. "What does it mean?" she cried. "The poor harmless creature is not a viper! But Lucilla always had a quiet aversion for her, I know."

"Mrs. Barrington probably felt that a poor harmless creature was no suitable guide for her daughter," rejoined I. Mr. Barrington smiled. "She lays no charge against Miss Reed's temper or character in this letter; and in her many conversations with me on the subject, she took no special ground of exception against her appointment, save that Felicia did not love her."

"That is true enough; Felicia cannot endure her," said Mr. Barrington.

"A mere childish vagary, adopted at second hand! What wrong has poor Reed done anybody that she should be put under the ban?" said the dowager. "She will be mightily enraged—I do not know how I shall tell her."

"Need she be told at all?" I asked.

"She will be sure to get to know," replied Mrs. Bethell. "Of course, Lucilla's voice must be obeyed. And as Reed is out of the question now, let us decide at once that Mrs. Gresham will do."

"So be it!" said Mr. Barrington. And the council broke up.

All in a hurry had vanished or been forgotten Helen's disadvantages that five minutes ago were impossible to be overcome. How people do hate trouble! Felicia proclaimed herself content, and my sister removed to the Manor on the day that Mr. Barrington left Stoneleigh. Once the arrangement concluded, it seemed so simple and natural that it ceased to be a source of gossip. I did not pretend to conceal my own satisfaction in it. It was delightful to have Helen so near. I loved my sister, but had she been ten times my sister, I would not have helped to place her in her delicate and responsible position had I not known her to be worthy of it; to be of all women whom I knew intimately, the best adapted to sustain it with credit and dignity. She made herself very soon thoroughly liked and respected both within the Manor walls and round about; and after a brief interval Mrs. Bethell privately con-

gratulated herself to me on having put Felicia under such admirable tutelage.

Miss Reed wisely kept a quiet tongue concerning her defeat. The only reference she made to it in my hearing while the smart was new was an inquiry pointed at me with a significant smile in the midst of a large company of young folks assembled in celebration of Felicia's birthday. Perhaps she meant it for a riddle: riddles and enigmas were our talk just then.

"What is worse than a snake in the grass, Mrs. Gower?" she asked.

"To poachers in my coverts Jowler would be much worse—that good dog!" cried Felicia. "We have no venomous snakes at Stoneleigh—I have seen nasty slow-worms down by the Round Pool at grannie's, though."

Whether the dear girl had understood the mean insinuation, and intended to repel it for me, I cannot be sure, but I remember fancying so at the time. Felicia was ever a staunch partisan for her friends.

CHAPTER VI.

Idyllic.

Two quiet uneventful years of which there is not much to tell followed on Mrs. Gresham's appointment. She acquired a most salutary influence with her young charge, whose education was carried forward with a vigilant industry. Felicia was a girl to profit by wise instruction. I must not profess that her learning was either very deep or very high, but she had a good conversational knowledge of many things, and one supreme talent—a passionate love of music and an exquisite voice. She went to London at intervals with Helen for lessons with masters, and did not waste her opportunities. Her life was simple, regular, refined, and she did not show herself in any haste to change its pleasant seclusion for the gaieties of the great world.

But there came a day at length when her grand-mamma said: "Felicia is nearly eighteen—it is time she was presented at court. Mrs. Gresham, we must go to town in May this year. Her papa—like all papas, is slow to realize her as a grown-up young woman, and would like to delay the event of her coming-out for another season; but I tell him, no: she must be presented this season, and presented

by myself. I begin to grow old, and am warned not to put off my duty. I know Lucilla would wish me to perform it if she could speak to say so, poor dear."

Felicia heard her fate with a sort of trembling joy. It was but natural that in her buoyant youth, health and spirits, she should look forward with a gentle triumph to her emancipation. Still she was not sanguinely hopeful as some girls are when new to the vast possibilities of life. She had learnt what true sorrow was at the death of her mother, and was being well-taught how to deny herself by her father, whose systematic indulgence of his own whims had already inured her to small disappointments.

Except for a little while in the partridge-shooting, a little while in the hunting season, for a week at the assizes when he was high sheriff, and another week during a county election, when all the world was aglow with the contest, Mr. Barrington had not been at Stoneleigh during the last twelve months. The Manor was very quiet during his long absences, not to say dull, but Felicia had leave to invite her friends to garden-parties and other festive celebrations in a simple way—a leave of which she availed herself quite as often as Mrs. Gresham thought desirable. George Sylvester made himself Felicia's righthand on these occasions, and she used him like a good-natured brother. People must talk, and some said already that these two were engaged: that Mrs. Barrington on her deathbed had expressed a wish for their union—a pure invention, but probable

enough to be believed; and it was believed in several quarters. It was nonsense, however; George still thought more of his dog and gun than of any lady, and Felicia had no heart that she was yet aware of to give away. Their frank attachment was just a pretty overture before the curtain drew up, and the lights were turned full upon the stage; and perhaps there was no sweeter truer music in all Felicia's life than its soft unimpassioned strains.

If we could look forward into the future should we guide our steps more discreetly, I wonder! The chances are that we should be afraid to move at all, and perhaps that is why Providence has shrouded it so completely from our ken. How could I foresee that in bringing my sister Helen to the Manor I was weaving the threads of Felicia's destiny? Helen was all I said, and more, in goodness, duty and fidelity to her charge, yet I have nothing to answer to the pregnant *if* with which Miss Reed has taunted me since. "*If* Mrs. Gresham had never come to Stoneleigh, Felicia's life would never have been so disastrously wrecked." It was a presumptuous word to say, but it was said and echoed—and I record it, recording also that it does not trouble my conscience one whit. I do not profess to be one of the initiated into the secret counsels of God, but my reason revolts against the notion that He, the All-Wise and Almighty, can permit the happiness or misery of a life to hinge upon such an *if*.

With her presentation at court and her first season in London impending who could ever have

expected that the curtain would draw up at Stoneleigh, and the opening scenes of the play be laid on the green lawns at the Manor? What a caprice of fate it seemed that Felicia, fancy-free until within a few days of her departure for town, should go with heart and mind pre-occupied, as I know she did.

We were in the last week of April, a lovely April that year; everything was forward in the gardens and in the woods, and the evenings were balmy enough to sit out of doors, and enjoy the fresh splendour of the spring. Felicia was taking her ease just then, in anticipation of her hard labour at pleasure in town, and her way of taking her ease was to keep open house for her friends. Mr. Tom Bethell was at Ringwood, and Rose and Blanche were with him; the girls were sociable, and came to and fro every day, more or less, to the great advancement of impromptu matches at croquet and archery—sports that Felicia and Rose excelled in. George Sylvester also made a frequent appearance, and the young Claylands and Abershaws with their several companions, both boys and girls, some launched in the world, but more in the adolescent stage. Felicia talked of this interlude as her last *real* holiday, and professed that it behoved her to make the best of it. “Have you not told me a hundred times that these are my happiest days?” she said, appealing the case. Perhaps we had—but I cannot recollect that she had ever testified much faith in this stereotyped assurance.

It was on a Monday morning—exactly a week

before they left Stoneleigh—that I met Helen and Felicia in the village by accident, and Helen said to me, as by a sudden thought prompting her, when we were in the act of parting: “Come across to the Manor this afternoon, if you have leisure. Poor Paul is going to drive over with George Sylvester for a little change and variety, and we can amuse him while the rest are at their everlasting croquet.”

The gentleman Helen alluded to as “poor Paul” was her brother-in-law, Captain Gresham, who had fought through the Crimean war from its beginning almost to its close, when he was desperately wounded at the attack on the Redan. After a few weeks in hospital he had been sent home, and was now at Bylands, under the care of the vicar, whose elder son had fallen in the famous assault out of which Captain Gresham had escaped with two terrible wounds, and laurels and fame enough for a veteran. I inquired if the hero was in a fair way to make a good recovery:—I had heard his praises continually, but had never seen him yet, though he was only four miles off. Felicia listened with sympathetic eyes.

“Yes,” said Helen, “he will be his own man again very soon now, they hope; but he still frets and chafes dreadfully at the war having come to an end in his absence. He is a thorough soldier, just like my dear James.” She gave a sigh to the retrospect, of which she was proud, nevertheless, and then we went our separate ways.

From my nursery window I saw the Ringwood and Abershaw girls, and the Bylands dog-cart drive

past to the Manor between three and four o'clock, and as my surest idle time was then, while my little Jack and Nellie were taking their siesta, I was not long in following. They had not got to croquet yet: indeed, it seemed as if play would be at a discount that afternoon; for all the girls were gathered in the shadow of the plane-tree on the upper terrace, where Captain Gresham had been put down to rest after the heat and fatigue of his short journey. He was tired to faintness at his arrival, and George Sylvester had been well scolded for not contriving otherwise; but now he was refreshed with wine and fruit, and reclining on a scarlet carriage-rug, was enacting the part of a languid Othello to half-a-dozen admiring Desdemonas. They made a pretty unconscious picture—the girls in dimity white dresses and straw hats, leaning one against another about the dark recumbent figure—and the rippling green of the foliage overhead, and behind the group, harmonized the scene delightfully.

Yet Helen, I thought, looked not quite happy presiding over it. "Go to your games, and let the poor fellow have some peace," said she, waving them off half-disdainfully.

"Peace is what Captain Gresham cannot endure!" exclaimed Rose Bethell. "If he may not be in the thick of a fight, he is best pleased to talk of battles and sieges."

The Bethell and Abershaw girls were on intimate terms with our hero already. Felicia and he now met for the first time. But she was as much fascinated as any of them, and seemed to hang upon

his words. I knew that he was bold as a lion, and that greybeards spoke honour of this stripling for his courage and dash, or else I might have been tempted to make fun of his pathetic airs, his soft eyes, his dejected mouth—not so firm then as I have seen it since. George Sylvester was quite out of favour for the hour, and he and Tom Claylands knocked the croquet-balls about by themselves for a long while before they could engage any partners. Helen, at length, succeeded in dispersing and employing the guests; but Felicia still sat on, her graceful, drooping figure and attentive face expressive of the kindest feeling. She had no idea how sweetly she looked, how considerately she listened and replied. Captain Gresham was suffering, and hiding it with all his might, and she was pitiful beyond words to utter her pity. She let no one serve him but herself. When tea was brought out upon the lawn, she selected a cup, put in cream and sugar, and gave it to him with her own hand. Rose Bethell and Kate Abershaw watching them in a pause of their game, envied her the gentle service.

Helen was quiet, so very quiet that I was sure she was ill at ease. But she did not interfere. Now and then she spoke, and in her accustomed way, she said, "Poor Paul" both in addressing him and in referring to him. "Poor Paul! when are they going to let your hair grow?" and "Poor Paul is not satisfied with glory, though one might think that he had had enough at the price."

"Why do you say 'Poor Paul and poor Paul?'"

I am not sorry for myself, and I don't love that sort of soothing," said he, at last, with some show of temper. Though refined by a long anguish the young hero's countenance betrayed him as still a little lower than the angels. He had masculine arrogance and all masculine qualities in full measure, there could be no doubt of it when one observed the lines of his visage.

Helen blushed. "It shall be 'Paul' now, or 'Captain Gresham,' if you prefer it," said she, apologetically. "But it seems only the other day that you were a boy, joining your regiment, and going out to the Crimea, and you came home to us so helpless." This was not like Helen's tact. She was confused, and said what she would rather not have said.

Captain Gresham's brow did not clear. Promotion comes quickly in the field before the enemy, and though he had won his company, he was still youthful enough not to relish being reminded of it in society where he wished to be approved. "One is not to be always a boy, nor always helpless," said he, in a testy tone. "I don't know why I am lounging here like a great baby instead of taking my part in that game. I came over with Sylvester on purpose for croquet."

"They don't want you—you must not spoil the game they are playing," said Felicia, and they both smiled.

A sort of freemasonry is so soon established between young people, and it did not appear that

Captain Gresham disliked sympathy and compassion as expressed in Felicia's face.

The sun began to decline, and all at once the evening air breathed chill. The convalescent shivered, and Helen whispered aside to me, "Oh, how I wish Paul had never come! He was not up to the exertion, and there is the drive back to Bylands. He shall not go in the dog-cart; I will send him in the close carriage."

"Suppose we keep him at the Rectory, and send him home to-morrow?" I suggested.

"I do believe that would be the wiser plan, if he will consent. And George can explain without alarming Mr. Willis." Helen acceded to my proposal, but with an evident doubt of its expedience. I had no idea that she would have been so quickly suspicious: I knew what she was fearing about now.

Captain Gresham heard my invitation with cheerfulness; he appeared glad to be spared the fatigue of moving far just then, and George Sylvester was only too thankful to be quit of his responsibility.

"If I could have guessed that Gresham was such a brittle specimen, I would never have taken him in charge I promise you, Mrs. Gower," cried the frank-spoken young fellow. "You are sure to have Mr. Willis over in the morning, and meanwhile, all you have to do with Gresham is to send him to bed early, and give him lots to eat and drink. And the doctor said he was not to be contradicted."

Everybody laughed. At this moment arrived

Arthur, and urged by Helen, with the help of his stout arm, Captain Gresham walked at once to the Rectory. It struck me at the time that he had a satisfaction in remaining on the spot which its obvious attractions and his personal requirements scarcely accounted for. And yet, in my own mind, I laughed at Helen for disquieting herself. But Helen, as she was larger in her views, was also shrewder in her perceptions than myself. And if there were not what we call a *fate* in these things, it would have been better for us all that Captain Gresham should have incurred the risk of returning to Bylands that night, instead of staying within reach of the Manor.

We did not count on keeping our guest beyond the next day, but he had a will of his own, and a wish to gratify, and the consequence was that Mr. Willis had to resign him to our mercies till the end of the week.

"This is a delicious air; I feel a healthy exhilaration in it that is wanting at Bylands," said the convalescent most ungratefully, for I am sure Bylands had saved his life.

"Almost any change is salutary at your stage of recovery, my dear boy. It acts as a tonic both on mind and body," replied Mr. Willis; and Arthur immediately put in his word and said that Captain Gresham must prolong his visit until he was tired of us.

My first thought was, how would Helen like it? And then I was vexed with myself for encouraging

such foolish, fantastic notions at the expense of our credit for hospitality. Captain Gresham waited for me to second Arthur's invitation, and I did it with, perhaps, a warmer cordiality, because I was conscious of having hesitated. He thanked us, and when Mr. Willis was gone he proceeded to leave us at liberty for our duties, and to make himself at home by lounging into the garden. It did not surprise me to hear by and by that he had strayed away to the more spacious lawns of the Manor; that Felicia had met him in her noon ramble, and had graciously made him free of the fine tonic air which he had found so beneficial yesterday.

It is not easy, when we have become intimate with a friend and his affairs, to go back to original impressions. Yet I do remember feeling in those first days of our acquaintance that Captain Gresham was a man to be either heartily loved or else not to be loved at all. He was anything rather than insignificant. No one could fail to see him when he was there, and to have a sentiment towards him, whether they knew him little or much. Arthur took to the young fellow amazingly. He was an agreeable guest in a house and capital company at the breakfast-table, while he was in his morning spirits and vigour. He always flagged before night. He had an immense physical loss to make up ere he would be really himself again; but the surgeons promised him a complete and permanent recovery, with time, care, and patience, and all that could be done for him now lay in the restorative influences of air, food, and cheerful quiet. And these he en-

joyed at Stoneleigh; amongst us, we certainly did him good.

He could not be at the Manor the whole day long, and when he was not there, what he liked best was to lie under the trees in some sheltered warm nook, and talk to us of himself. Yes, to talk of himself, past, present, and future. And we encouraged him. When anybody has a story to tell, it is the truest ever from his own lips; for if the facts be a trifle distorted, we get the results of their action, as he has felt it, even in his method of representing them. Of course, we knew something of the Greshams through Helen, but he told us more. He spoke of his mother, who was re-married to a country gentleman much younger than herself, and had almost cast off her children by her first husband; of his sister, the widow of Frederick Willis; there were only these two left out of five.

“My mother has Fairfield for her life, but it must eventually descend to me,” Captain Gresham said. “My father left us all dependent on her, and it is little either of justice or mercy that she has shown us. She gives me a hundred a year in aid of my pay, and to Kitty the same: poor Kitty, with nothing but her pension besides, and two boys to bring up! I daresay you wonder why I am not at Fairfield now—my mother has never asked me. Willis, that excellent fellow, and Kitty met me at Portsmouth, and brought me to Bylands. Ah, what grief they were in for Fred! but they put it all aside to be of use to me. I should not be alive now but for their devoted kindness. Kitty is a jewel, poor

dear, and I trust she will stay at Bylands with Fred's father as long as the old man lives."

He seemed to be very fond of his sister, and to be, indeed, of a warm-hearted nature. There was even an undertone of regret in his impeachment of his mother, who, as we knew from other quarters, had behaved worse than a step-mother to her children. James Gresham had not been a favourite at home, and Helen had only gone once to Fairfield since her return from India as a widow. Mrs. Carlyon (the former Mrs. Gresham was Mrs. Carlyon now) was haunted by a constant anxiety and terror lest any of her belongings should become an expense to her. I remember Helen being very angry once at a quite uncalled-for warning from her not to run into debt, because no help to get out of it would be given her from Fairfield. Captain Gresham existed under the same menace, and no doubt he spoke with feeling sincerity when he said that my sister Helen was fortunate in not having any *encumbrances*—unlike his poor Kitty.

"Helen does not think so; she envies Kitty her boys," said I.

"There is no understanding the contradictions of women! Some covet other people's cares, some loathe their own," was his hasty answer. "Mothers are commonly supposed to be proud of their sons who win them a bit of glory; mine values me less than her least luxury. There is not one she would forego to advance my interests. I have experienced her refusals."

"Never mind," said Arthur; "you have done gallantly thus far without requiring sacrifices. Money goes for very little in promoting true content. You would rather have your title to the Victoria Cross than receive a gift of ten thousand pounds."

"I would not barter personal distinction for any of the good things that money can buy. I rate it as of a far nobler worth. Still, the *want* of money is a positive evil, and may cause a man to lack what is far more desirable than money's self. How often, for instance, has a soldier to leave the girl he loves behind him, because he cannot afford to marry her? Either she is so high above him as to be out of his reach, or she is rich, and his honour would be impugned if he ventured to cast eyes of desire upon herself."

"Or she is poor, and they have not the courage of their fortunes between them," added I; though I felt tolerably sure that my illustration was not needed for the completion of the case that Captain Gresham was revolving.

"That is a much less frequent hindrance than you imagine; you would admit it if you had to follow the regiment. A girl is never too poor for a soldier if she takes his fancy, and they both have youth."

"Then I am convinced that there is an average of happy marriages amongst you. I believe in love-matches."

"So do I. Yes, the majority turn out well. The service limits our opportunities of extravagance. As

soon as a fellow comes into his money, he sells out, unless he be an enthusiast for the profession."

"You are heart and soul devoted to it?"

"Yes. I have fallen on stirring times of war. You are glorifying yourselves on the restoration of peace, but don't hope that it will last long. Forty years of it was enough. Charming as you make this pastoral life, I am not by any means ready yet to turn my sword into a pruning-hook."

"I hate war," said I; "it is one of the scourges of the earth. I am of that old opinion which would revive the duello, and let those who make the quarrels be the only ones to fight!"

"Wait till this little Jack of yours gets a pair of colours; then the Spartan mother will develop in you."

"My precious little Jack! Nay, but he is not to be a soldier."

"Then he must go to sea and grow a wooden leg. And you will be so proud of it that when he brings it home you will drop down on your knees and kiss his timber toes."

I kissed his bonny round rosy cheeks which were within reach just then, and declined any further jesting talk on so serious a subject. Arthur laughed at the tears in my eyes, and declared I was a goose.

On Wednesday afternoon Felicia stopped at the Rectory gate on Stella. She was going to ride to the Dower House to visit her grandmamma. Captain Gresham espied her the first, and went out; and

when I joined them they were talking together, Felicia with a lovely blush, and a shy self-consciousness that I had never seen in her before, and Captain Gresham with a victorious air that became him well. I was glad to interrupt the colloquy; it had a dangerous look for Helen's peace.

While we were still at the gate up rode Mr. Tom Bethell with Blanche who dismounted to come in. Their visit was to our guest. Then Felicia cantered off, Captain Gresham lingering the last to see her go, while her last good-bye and last glance were given to him. Perhaps they thought no one observed them, but Mr. Tom Bethell said to me as we sauntered side by side up the gravel walk: "All the girls are in love with Gresham's sentimental phiz."

"It will do them no harm if he does not make love to them," was my answer.

I know our proneness to adoration of the heroic, how susceptible we are in extreme youth—and also how easily diverted. Blanche blushed. Though she was one of those spirited girls who acknowledge only a limited liability to the weaknesses of their sex, she shared the general admiration felt for Captain Gresham by her more impressionable friends. I was pleased that she did: there is safety in numbers; and with all the girls in love with him, he might find a difficulty in choosing—if his choice were not fixed already. We really knew nothing of the young man's private history; but in the country matrimonial speculations form a staple for talk, and in certain gossip quarters it had been said that he would not

be a bad match for any girl in our neighbourhood —*except* Felicia Barrington.

But what if he set his heart on the exception! No one had dared yet to think of such a catastrophe out of the family. I knew that Helen was brooding over it, and I believe a suspicion was sown that day in Tom Bethell's mind, and also in Miss Reed's. For Tom Bethell asked me pointedly how long our convalescent was going to stay at the Rectory, and if he was much at the Manor with his sister-in-law. And Miss Reed, with sly inuendo, remarked, on the last occasion of our meeting before the departure for London, that the country was, perhaps, fuller of danger than the town, and propinquity was of all perils the most to be dreaded for young people whose friendship was undesirable.

"Felicia, dear little innocent, talks of only one person; out of the abundance of the heart the guileless mouth speaketh, and her grandmamma and I agree that she has seen and heard enough of that person for the present. Perhaps it was unavoidable under the circumstances, but it will be good for her to have distractions."

I repeated this pregnant speech to Helen. "Yes," said she, "it is so. Felicia reads everything about the war that she can lay her hands on, and when Paul's regiment goes into action, she tells me all about it a dozen times over. When we return to Stoneleigh, she says she shall make friends with poor Katherine Willis. She even likes to hear about James, and asks endless questions about Paul as a boy. I cannot tell you what a relief it will be to

my mind to get away with her to town, where a thousand new impressions may combine to efface this one."

"Candidly, Helen," said I appealing to her; "do you think Captain Gresham, if he aspired to Felicia, would meet with positive opposition from her family? For my part, I should maintain that his honours are the best sort of counter-weight to her heiress-ship."

"I would rather not discuss the chances of it, Clare. I like Paul, he is a fine character in many respects; but I doubt very much whether it would be for the happiness of either that they should become ardently attached."

"We are prodigiously taken with him at the Rectory. Arthur calls him so manly and sincere. A young fellow cannot help looking rather silly with a lot of girls at his feet, but there is none of that fatuity in his manner when he is with us alone. And the bairnies are fond of him—always a good sign."

"That is a doting mother's notion! But seriously, dear Clare, don't breathe a word of what has passed between us to anybody but Arthur. Miss Reed is full of hints, but I shall not let her be confidential. And to-morrow I trust we shall be on the road to safety. It is not likely that Paul will follow us to London, and if he do, London society is such a labyrinth that they may never meet. And besides, Mr. Barrington will be there to keep watch for his daughter."

Felicia deferred her leave-taking of me until the last morning, and until she could have me for a few last moments alone. The shrewd little witch had divined my approval of Captain Gresham. She even asked in a whisper if he was not like Prince Charming.

"Nonsense!" said I. "You will lose yourself in a wilderness of Prince Charmings when you go to court, if you are so easily fascinated."

She shook her head, laughing, yet half pensively. "I shall tell *you*," she added.

"When there is anything to tell," rejoined I.

Felicia was of a delicate, but not of a reserved nature. She had elected me the recipient of her confidences since she lost her mother. The dear child remembered that it was to me she had been committed. Helen's very position created a certain distance between them; but with me she was at ease. I felt peculiarly glad of it at this time. It was good that she should have a friend to resort to, free from strangeness: not too old for generous sympathy, nor too young for sound counsel. Most girls choose their bosom-ally amongst their companions of the same age, but Felicia found no need to do this; for when she wanted one, there was I, ready to her hand, tried, proved and loved through many years. Janet and Carr were, as ever, her devoted servants, but Felicia was their sweetly imperious mistress, above all familiarity. It was known at the Dower House and to Mr. Barrington that I was her special friend in whom she trusted; and up to the present

time, neither jealousy nor disapprobation had appeared. It was my aim to avoid arousing any feeling on the matter, and to keep myself in the background, that our cordial alliance might not challenge curious remark. I know that it has been made a mystery of since why we were so intimate, but I think it needs no explanation beyond what I have given.

The London house of the Bethells had been let for several years, but the lease had been calculated to expire with Felicia's child-life, and we heard a great deal of its re-decorating and re-furnishing for her occupation. Henceforward she was to pass the spring in town, and though the dowager protested a little against resuming the toils of a *chaperone*, it seemed to me that she prepared for them with quite sufficient alacrity.

The household moved up to London some days beforehand, and on Monday, the twenty-eighth of April, Mrs. Gresham, Janet and Carr followed in personal attendance on the young lady of the Manor. Mrs. Bethell and her factotum travelled by the same train. The establishment was a careful selection from the best of the servants at Stoneleigh and also at the Dower House. There was a new park carriage, new horses of great price and beauty, and a new coachman bred to the town. On these fine possessions, the pride of high life, I cannot expatiate so eloquently as, perhaps, they deserve; but I recollect that Mr. Tom Bethell said his niece had gone to town with a very splendid retinue, but not

beyond her fortunes; for she was the richest heiress whose introduction was announced for that season, and already people were talking of who would be a match for the beautiful Miss Barrington.

CHAPTER VII.

Felicia's First Season.

FOR the events of Felicia's first season in town, I shall betake myself to her letters. She was a capital gossip for a friend in the country—a letter-writer who deserved to have lived before the days of the penny-post. She gave me many a glimpse of the world that I should else have lived and died unwotting of, and because she knew that she could tell me nothing of herself but what would interest me, she let her pen run into full details, and was grave, gay, sad, serious, sarcastic, merry, just as the spirit moved her at the moment. Extracts will sometimes suffice, sometimes I must give the whole of a letter; but for the continuity of the story, I shall omit beginnings and endings, and refrain from parentheses: if any matter seem to need explanation, it will recur, and be explained further on.

“Imagine, Cousin Clare, that I have been only four hours in London, and already I have leisure that I do not know what to do with. So I will spend it on you. Papa was here, awaiting our arrival, and Uncle Ralph presented himself at dinner. Who would ever suppose that papa and he are

brothers? papa so exquisitely pleasant, Uncle Ralph so cynical and cross. He ridicules everything that people of taste and feeling admire: he is ill-natured even to me.

“‘Well, Miss Felicity, how long will it be before your country-roses are fallen?’ was his first address. ‘You are going to make your curtsey to the Queen, and to marry a lord, at the least. Enter the beautiful Miss Barrington with a flourish of trumpets! Exit the same to a muffled peal.’ Was it not unkind?”

“Oh, for a breath of the morning on the Langhill after the exciting, transitory honour and joy of going to Court! My presentation is over, and I am free of society. I did not entangle my feet in my train, or turn nervous, or faint, or forget the measured grace of my Court-curtsey, or blush more than was becoming—this is grandmamma’s flattering report. Mine is that there was a polite crush, very perilous to my water-lilies and clouds of tulle, that I longed for the critical three minutes to be accomplished, that I passed out of the crowd into a circle of royalties, all in a shimmer of jewels and gold and costly apparel, that a dignified, stout little lady in blue gave me a white hand to kiss, that I looked up with a tremor and she looked down with a smile, and so I fell right loyally in love with our Gracious Sovereign Lady the Queen. * * * * And then it was over; and we were waiting for our carriage to take us away. Papa would have me dine in my fine clothes, and go with him to the opera afterwards—

he pretends to be proud of his daughter; which is no more than a fair return for my admiration of him. Except Prince Charming, I know no one so captivating. How is the Prince, Cousin Clare? You may tell him my news, if you please."

"I have sent you the *Morning Post* in which you may read an account of two balls, a concert and a breakfast at which grannie, papa and I were amongst the distinguished guests. I am getting into the full swing of it, Cousin Clare. My youth, health and spirits bear me on, and I scarcely feel the earth under me or the hours as they fly. But this is Sunday and we are resting. Mrs. Gresham and I have been to church—the only two of the household able or willing to make the time. What a rush life is here! Yet with what zest grannie enters into it! Her contemporaries who have never been out of the whirl are rallying round her: some of them old ladies, fearfully and wonderfully made up! I must tell you of one who was a famous beauty, and a toast in her day—Lady Wimborne-Ellis. And she might be lovely still if she would consent to be herself: if one might pluck off her wig, wash her clean of paint and powder, and decently cover her up in soft silk and laces. She has vivacious blue eyes, and the pretty winning expression that must have been her chief fascination is discernible still amongst her wrinkles and fictitious adornments. She leans to the airy frivolous style in dress, and wears a wilderness of mock roses amongst the frills and flounces of her white tarlatan. If she

were to appear at Stoneleigh as she appears in a fashionable London drawing-room, the people would treat her as an escaped madwoman. She has a son of, at least, forty, and he does not seem ashamed of his mother. If she were mine, how I should pray that vanity would spare her a little while before she goes hence, and is no more seen!"

"Do you love fine upholstery, Cousin Clare? Not you, indeed, you love dimity and well scrubbed boards. Then I must spare you the bill of my sumptuous furniture, my triple-pile carpets, satin curtains and cabinet-work glittering with French polish and or-molu; of my sanctum and my bed—the last an ethereal structure of lace draperies and blue silk, in which, however, I do not sleep so soundly as in my little white bed at home, that the sun shines upon. But Janet and Carr are pleased: they call it no more than is becoming for their young lady; so I try to resign my mind to gaudy state, fancy myself a queen, and dream 'how uneasy lies the head that wears a crown.' The hum of the world getting-up and going about its work begins before cock-crowing, and there is no more silence, let us be ever so weary. The hum rises, spreads, swells louder, fuller, nearer, until it becomes the many-voiced roar of London in the fashionable season. You have never lived in London—don't wish to live here. Stoneleigh is far, far happier. I shall never really care for this fuss and finery as some do. It was a refreshment yesterday to meet George Sylvester with

his red country face, and to hear him talk quite unaffectedly of how he is bored in London. 'You need not stay, you are not going to be presented,' says grannie, as sharp as a needle. 'No,' says George, 'I am not going to be presented, but' (with a rueful look at me) 'I am under bonds for six weeks to my Aunt Clarissa.'

"Grannie laughed at him for his submissiveness. Poor George, as the youngest son at Bylands, is sent to dance attendance on this aunt, who is his god-mother besides, and very rich. I have seen her once—Mrs. Clarissa Constable, an eccentric old lady who goes about doing good in very shabby clothes. George does not like it. I wanted him to ride with papa and me in the Park this morning early, but he was pledged to visit a Ragged School that she has established in the mews at the back of her house; and to-night, instead of dining with us and going to the opera afterwards, he has to stop at home, and hand cups of tea to the devout ladies who attend her monthly Jerusalem parties. Does a 'Jerusalem Party' explain itself? It is a drawing-room tea and tattle with netting, knotting and crochet for the conversion of the Jews—one of the many forms of pious dissipation which prevail in the gay season amongst the unco' good, who compound for their own busy idlenesses by condemning the operas, balls and plays that we delight in. George wants me to know her better, and is sure I shall love her when I do; for she is a miracle of charity and benevolence, though one of the untidiest, fattest, most irregular old ladies in London."

“Such a day! such queer strange sights and sounds and histories! I was between laughing and crying all the morning, and even now, as I think of it, I am laughing with the tears in my eyes. We talk about our poor people at Stoneleigh, but we know nothing of the tragical grotesque pathos of real poverty. If I were to live to be a hundred, I never could forget what I have seen since I got up this morning. And it was all through George Sylvester. He persuaded me yesterday to pay a visit to his aunt, and she invited me to breakfast at eight o’clock, with a promise that she would show me things undreamt of in young-lady-hood philosophy. My curiosity at once consented. It is no effort to me to rise betimes, and I kept my appointment with the strictest punctuality. I had better have taken half an hour’s grace; for when I reached the house with Carr, one maid was scouring the steps, and another was pretending to elicit a sort of order out of the dusty chaos that serves their mistress for dining-parlour.

“I ought to preface my story by telling you that Mrs. Clarissa Constable regards the common comforts of life as non-essentials, beneath the care of an immortal soul; and her servants, regulating their labours by her theory, are remiss in providing even for its decencies, are slovenly, lazy and wasteful, as mere worldly folk would consider it quite wicked to let them be. The young woman who was ‘settling’ the parlour conducted me up-stairs to a bedroom (the blinds had not been drawn up, nor the windows

opened, since Queen Anne died), and when I went down again, after loitering ten minutes, I found half the oval table spread for breakfast, while the other half was left heaped with a month's accumulated neglects—a crushed black silk bonnet crowning the pile.

“A minute or two, and George appeared—from a walk round by the square to escort me, as I discovered, he not having reckoned on my being true to time; and then came Mrs. Clarissa—O, the frowsy old saint! I wish I could draw you her picture! She complimented me on my blooming cheeks: ‘There used to be plenty such roses in my day—there are very few worth plucking now,’ says she. ‘I have seen bushels of ’em, only waiting a buyer,’ says George:—he hates this cant on the degeneration of the modern youth, and so do I: especially from one who loved the world, and did not leave it, until it was leaving her—who, according to grannie, has only exchanged one form of worldliness for another. But I don’t like to believe that; Mrs. Clarissa seems genuinely self-denying and kind.

“A bell rang, one servant entered, and we knelt down for prayers, which Mrs. Clarissa delivered without book, improvising a rather pointed petition in favour of me—Well, perhaps I need it.—You cannot imagine, unless you lead this life, how little leisure there is for quiet collectedness and thought. I must struggle against its encroachments, or my time will be all devoured to the very crumbs—and mamma’s sweet counsels forgotten.

“After prayers followed the breakfast. Poor

George, he ought to have his reward, for it must be a severe mortification of the flesh to spend six weeks with Mrs. Clarissa! To say that her table is plain is nothing. She ate a dish of porridge and a slice of brown bread herself, and for George and me there was the brown loaf, fresh butter and water-cresses, with tea—a wholesome and sufficient diet, I presume, for I felt light as a feather, and very good-humoured upon it. The old lady offered no apology; she is inured to this ascetic simplicity, and if I spent my days as hers are spent, I might acquire the same distaste for luxury. How could one walk about amongst the starving, oneself always full-fed?

“The meal was not long, and while Mrs. Clarissa read her letters afterwards, George was bidden to show me the curiosities and pictures in the drawing-room—all clouded with a grey gauze of dirt. And at last, towards eleven o’clock, we went out—the old black bonnet, an older shawl and a still more old pair of black gloves completing Mrs. Clarissa’s toilette. If ever we have a Great Revolution, and I am reduced to such straights as the dames and demoiselles of the *ancien régime*, I’ll turn dresser to old ladies. There is so much beauty of old age thrown away, for want of taste and sense! Mrs. Clarissa has a serene soft face that would be lovely in a prim net cap and quakerish white chip bonnet; but not even a *chiffonnier* of Paris would pick up the clothes she wears, all composed of the cheapest materials, and put on long after they have ceased to owe her any service. The marvel is that she still looks the gentlewoman, which I attribute to her

courtesy mingled with authority—pity she does not exercise the authority more at home! But no, all her energy is spent on the promotion of philanthropic schemes out-of-doors—schemes for rescuing children out of the gutter, and young girls out of worse mire, for setting the halt and lame on their feet, for opening the eyes of the blind, and the ears of the deaf. I am not making fun, Cousin Clare, it is really so. To interest Mrs. Clarissa, you must be poor and in misery, sick or very wicked. She has a provoking air and tone in addressing me sometimes, as if my good fortune and my joy in my happy life were wrong—Thus: ‘Ah, my dear, it seems all well with you *now*, but what when the world and its pleasures fail you? Where will you seek for comfort?’ ‘I’ll come to you,’ said I, in the thoughtless gaiety of my heart. ‘Mind an old woman’s words, Felicia Barrington—God will not let any of us find comfort but in himself. Therefore, do not forget him now, and he will not forget you in the time of trouble.’ She spoke with such overearnest solemnity that I was quite vexed and dismayed—George too. It did not feel like a word in season. I don’t see the moral and spiritual advantage of anticipating sorrows—quite sufficient to the day is the evil thereof. Many a little vexation befalls me that I never complain of——

“The ragged children were singing doggerel rhymes, clapping hands, and marching in time and step round and round the disused stable, which has been converted into a school-refuge for them. We looked in at the open door, and waited until the

exercise was over—the ludicrous precision of it is a great fact in discipline accomplished; I suppose the sparrows who have been there a month or two help in taming the newly-caught. This school is Mrs. Clarissa's peculiar hobby. She set it a-going, keeps it open at her own expense, and in the cold weather, when it is the fullest, she provides a warm meal each day for her starvelings. They come and go, she says, and often she loses sight of them altogether; but some remain, and acquire decent habits, and on a few, both boys and girls, she has kept a hold since they began life for themselves in the early independent way common to London sparrows. She told me the whole story of one—the newsboy who brings her daily paper. He was a ragamuffin with never a shoe to his foot, who came to her open windows one June evening when a Jerusalem party was assembled. An impudent urchin he was, and amused the ladies by turning wheels on the pavement—(*Punch* had an illustration of this ingenious tumbling to earn a ha'penny in a recent number); but after their laughter came pity, and one of the congregation who was apt to speak her mind, remarked that they would be better employed tailoring for that little Christian waif than tatting for the Jews. And then she cried out, 'Where do you live, little boy?' 'Nowhere!' 'Are you hungry?' He grinned, and a lump of cake was tossed to him over the area-railings; he caught it cleverly, and turned a double summer-sault for thanks. The inquisitive lady pursued her investigations. 'Have you a father living?' He shook his head. 'A mother? Any

brothers? any sisters?' Only negative shakes. 'He has not a bad face,' says another lady. 'He would be pretty if he were clean,' says a third. 'Would you like to go to school?' asked Mrs. Clarissa. To this his reply was a comical grimace, and he was off like a shot. They thought they had done with him, but one Sunday night when Mrs. Clarissa returned from church, there was he, holding on to the railings, and trying to see into the room; but it was dark and empty now, and there were no ladies to give him cake. He looked pinched and shivering, for the weather was beginning to be cold. Mrs. Clarissa ordered him food, and just said, pointing to the mews: 'Down there, in the old stable, I have a few lads who come to learn to read a bit, and to write and count, and to hear who made them, and cares for them more than they care for themselves—do you know who that is?' The lad looked up to the sky, twinkling with millions of stars above the dusky roofs and chimney-pots, and nodded: 'He's there.' 'And here and everywhere,' began Mrs. Clarissa, spreading her hands abroad as one about to preach. But the little scamp cut her short with a whistle expressive of the profoundest incredulity, and immediately fled round the corner. He was seen no more until November, when one bitter sleety morning the milkman found him asleep on the doorstep. It is winter that tames these wild birds; the cold and hunger together subdue them. He was got to school then, and proved an intelligent boy with really good dispositions: not parrot-pious like an infant in a tract, but bold enough to speak

the truth, and not averse to soap and water. Spring arrived, and he grew restless again, and betook himself to vagabondage and the streets. Mrs. Clarissa has a rule,—she does not contend with Nature, but tries to employ the strong inclinations that will not be controlled, and she got him a water-cress walk. I should be afraid to say how many miles she told me he tramped between dawn and breakfast-time.—The next autumn he came back into the school, and the following season she started him as a news-boy. And a very sprightly, intelligent young rascal he is: too much of a weed, however, for the London garden; and she would like to transplant him to the Canadian backwoods, where his abounding physical vigour, pluck and audacity would be valuable, and in their right place.

“Where there are thirty or forty refuse children gathered together, we are sure to see some bad faces, and there were some in Mrs. Clarissa’s school. Yet their ugliness was, I think, in every instance, the result of disease. There was one poor girl, Eliza, almost helplessly lame; her knee had been injured when she was an infant, and left to get better or worse as nature might please: the consequence is a life-long deformity and anguish. She looks sour and sulky upon it, and cannot be made to keep herself clean. She was the most hopeless specimen of all; and yet her great eyes had a gloomy sort of beauty, and she is kind to her little brothers whom she brings to the school with her. She has a half-witted father, and a mother who goes out charing and makes herself comfortable, leaving the family

to the charge of this lame eldest girl, whose age may be about thirteen. There is one sketch for you.

“Here is another—Bridget. Bridget is Irish—a rather pretty little creature, in the wild Irish style: that is, with a flat face, scarlet lips, bold blue eyes, and a shock of unkempt black hair. She was in a mild mood when I saw her, but Mrs. Clarissa tells me she is subject to fits of temper so violent, obstinate, and malicious, that she might be possessed by a devil. Perhaps she is. At other times she is a favourite, for her rollicking humour and wit. And she never throws things, strikes, or calls bad names even at her worst. They expect to make something valuable out of Bridget, because she is laborious and honest, and capable of attachment.

“And now I think you must have had enough of the Ragged School.

“We went next to visit a poor pensioner, Mary, a young woman whom Mrs. Clarissa has been feeding, clothing, and patronising for these four years past. Let me try to describe her. She was sitting up in bed, supported by a moveable, cushioned frame, and everything about her was white, and redolent of a faint, cleanly poverty—all prepared for a reception. The coverlet was strewn with shreds and patches of bright-coloured kid, silk, and ribbon, which she was fashioning into dolls' shoes of various sizes. Such slender white delicate hands she had, and a face as fair; but she pretends to be totally blind—and I don't believe she is: she looks to me the picture of cunning and craft. She

went through a descriptive catalogue of her ills for my edification—I will not recite them for yours, however, for I am sure they are simulated. I asked if a doctor had seen her. She said she had a horror of doctors—doctors had brought her to the pass she was in, and she groaned. While we were there a fat obsequious woman who “does for” the dolls’ shoe-maker came in from the next room, and canted awfully—a league of impostors, Cousin Clare, my word for it! George had stayed in the court below while we went upstairs, and when we rejoined him, he asked significantly what my opinion was of Mary. I told him with perfect frankness: he was of the same way of thinking.

“‘But Aunt Clarissa is ready to stake her faith on the sly little rogue’s honesty,’ said he, laughing at her. Mrs. Clarissa coloured, her eyelids quivered, and she seemed sadly put out, but she answered him candidly, ‘I begin to fear that Mary is what you call her—a sly little rogue—and her chief disease, moral obliquity. But the question arises: Shall I turn her adrift because she is worse than I imagined? To be maimed of her body was bad enough, but to be so deceitful of heart and crooked in all her ways, is far more deadly for her poor soul. She has grown very bold in her wicked pretences.’ ‘She will lie and cheat and feign as long as she has breath,’ said George. ‘I have not patience to see you so taken in.’ ‘Human patience is very short, George. We have not forgiven Mary seven times yet. But it will be my painful duty to tell her that I have found her out.’ Justice was satisfied with that prospect, and

we two severe young moralists held our peace. Poor Mrs. Clarissa was very unhappy, and led the way home. I could almost have wished that she had kept her charitable delusion."

"You ask me the end of the story of Mary—perhaps we shall never know the end. Here is a brief continuation:—Mrs. Clarissa did not linger over her painful task, reluctant as she was to have her suspicions confirmed. George was my informant. He told me that his aunt allowed the usual number of days to elapse between her visits, and then went again at the hour she always goes, but accompanied by Dr. Tuke. Mary received them with her pious complacency, and as her *rôle* is before a stranger, enumerated her afflictions. Mrs. Clarissa approached the subject she had come upon very tremulously: 'Do you know, Mary dear, it has sometimes struck me lately that you have a glimmering of sight which you used not to have when first I knew you.' 'Surely the Lord is going to be gracious to me after all these years that I have prayed him to open my eyes!' cried Mary, clasping her hands with joyful enthusiasm. 'She is no more blind than I am,' muttered Dr. Tuke. Mary seemed not to hear him. 'I've had a sort of lightening and flashing at odd times,' she went on in her hysteric ejaculatory tone, 'and I've said to myself, if the holy God should be willing to show forth his power on *me*—a poor miserable sinner—and give sight to her that was born blind, what a miracle that would be!' Mrs. Clarissa was shedding tears. 'I should like this gentleman, he is very kind

and clever, to examine your spine, Mary,' said she. 'And perhaps we shall find a miracle working there also,' added the shrewd old medico. But Mary assumed a solemn mien, and declined the examination. 'No,' said she, 'I've made a vow that never a one more of them doctors shall have his hands on me! If the Lord raises me up, well and good, let Him do what pleases Him best; if not, may He give me grace and strength to bear my cross patiently to the blessed end!' 'What if I say you are able at this moment to skip as nimbly out of your bed as any woman alive? And that without succour from either above or below,' said the doctor. 'Sir, if you come to insult a poor creature, you may go.'

"They went, but you will not be surprised to hear that Mrs. Clarissa has refused to give her interesting *protégée* up. She is in half-a-dozen minds a day about her—whether she is a thorough-paced cheat, or a monument of divine mercy in a series of miraculous cures, or a hysterical subject with vast simulative powers, or a cripple, helpless and destitute, such as she persists in appearing. Dr. Tuke admits that she is hysterical, but not blind or paralytic as she pretends, and he says she must have connivers at her imposture to sustain it as she does. Mrs. Clarissa is at present bent on bringing her to a conviction of her guilt in imposing on the charitable. George does not think she will see it until it ceases to pay."

"I have told you nothing yet, you say, of my triumphs and conquests. Bless your innocence, I

have none to tell! I am one of those gentry whom King James advised to stop at home on their estates, where they were like big ships in a river, instead of coming to London where they were mere cock-boats on the great sea. I am one little girl amongst ten thousand—one little girl more precious than all the rest to one person—and that's papa. I have no train of suitors—how should I have? George is extremely useful, and I always like him. But I am not in love with anybody in particular—not yet. I know how curious you are to hear whether Prince Charming has paid his respects to us in town—and not to keep you in suspense—he has—and papa was pleasant—papa likes him. Prince Charming dines with us to-night.”

“The Queen's Birthday Drawing-room.—Yes, papa and I went, and I send you the *Post* with all about it. It was a Collar-Day for the Knights, and everybody was *en grande tenue*. The *Post* describes for you some of the dresses, but not mine—an oversight, of course. It was lovely, and I wore mamma's opals and diamonds; white silk puffed over with frosted tulle, petticoat and train alike, and trimmed with bunches of forget-me-not. My wreath was of the same bonny wee blue flowers, and my long veil hanging down behind of plain tulle. Papa and George and *somebody else* exclaimed in delight at the airy, fairy, elegant simplicity of my apparel, but grannie pouted a discontented lip:—in fact, she knew what it had cost, and that Janet and Carr made it! I had been spending so much money in

another fashion that if I had gone to a court-milliner, and had ordered the dress grannie wished me to have, I must have run into debt for it, and that I never mean to do. I enjoyed the gala, and Prince Charming came to see me dressed before I went—he was the *somebody else*. Pray don't purse up your pretty mouth so dubiously, Cousin Clare. He asked simply—Might he come? And another somebody answered as simply, He might if he thought it worth while.

“There was a prodigious crowd in the streets, for the Queen's Drawing-room was only one item of amusement in the Celebration of Peace. But night was the grand display! We had a tiresome debate, prorogued and resumed at every available moment from the hour of our meeting at breakfast until past nine o'clock, when it was carried by a majority of *one*, that I might be taken out to see a little bit of the illuminations and fire-works. (For accounts thereof read the papers.) Grannie predicted that we should all come back crushed to death, but we happily escaped so melancholy a catastrophe. Uncle Tom took charge of Rose, Mr. Courteney of Blanche, and George Sylvester of me. Papa would have escorted Mrs. Gresham, but she would not go. Prince Charming stayed at home in obedience to the popular vote. He had come up from Hampton Court in the morning and we kept him: we did not let him leave us till to-day.

“By dint of much coaxing, papa has been prevailed on to consent to a Peace Celebration at Stoneleigh. It is to take place immediately on our return,

and Prince Charming has promised that he will come and play hero. Shall we not be proud—a V. C. man——O, Cousin Clare, I am so happy! But what a sigh that was! it almost blew away my letter—it would have blown it quite away, but for the weight of matter in its pages.”

“What am I so happy about? About everything! I am happy to be alive and gay—and beautiful in some folks’ fond eyes—have you forgotten when it was a blessed thing only to see the sun, and feel the air, and hear the birds sing?

“Uncle Ralph observed this morning, when he met me riding in the Park with papa, that my roses were more permanent than he expected, but had I caught my young lord yet? Papa looked glum, and rode on—he does not like this sort of jesting. ‘I don’t want to lose my little Felicity,’ he says continually, and I am sure he will thank neither lord nor commoner who may come to fetch me away! And I am equally sure that I shall never part from him until somebody else makes me love him better than I love papa—and I hardly know how that can be!

“You have heard of ‘two aspirants to my favour.’ Have you, indeed! They were hardly worth mentioning: the first had the *name* of a lord—papa abolished *him* at a word. The second sent his mother to speak for him—*modest*, but I would rather on the whole my lover spoke for himself.

“Rose and Blanche are having their hearts’ content of balls—four this week. Rose is wonderfully pretty, and Blanche is distinguished, but so

abrupt and odd that people are afraid of her. Uncle Tom was remarkably civil while he stayed (was it *he* brought you rumours?) but it is pleasanter with the girls alone. They have not much amusement at Ringwood; I am so glad that you suggested I should invite them to town. It keeps poor Reed in good humour too; for she chaperones them about, and they all enjoy it. They would like to be presented, but grannie says decidedly, No. They ought to have been presented at their first coming-out; but as they were not, they must wait now until they are married. Blanche need not wait long if she can agree with Mr. Courteney. Uncle Tom has given his consent, but she coquettes and says, she sees no fun in getting married—she would rather be a girl, and dance and play a few years longer. Perhaps Mr. Courteney will be so obliging as to wait her pleasure.”

“You would be delighted with the new pictures—it is a very good exhibition. Times of great national excitement and trial must be favourable to genius. The war has suggested two or three admirable pictures. A ‘Ball in the Camp’ charms the majority, but my heart is divided between ‘The Child of the Regiment,’ a little darling lying asleep on a tombstone in a cemetery, beyond which is the smoke of the battle; and a tired soldier ‘Home’ from the war, and just welcomed by his family. It made me think of Jane Burt’s son—the meeting there would have been much like this if he had survived to come back. Don’t forget to tell me how his poor young

widow is—and the baby, how does it fare? I need not remind you that they must want for nothing we can give them—but, alas, how little that is! I believe they will get his medals when the distribution takes place; you might tell them so—perhaps it will help to console his mother, for she was very proud of him.

“I could not look at any more pictures that day, but I have been twice since. Mrs. Gresham and I like to go best in the cool of the morning, after breakfast, and to come away before the rooms fill. The weather is very sultry now, and I shall not be sorry to go out of town for a few days to Grand-mamma Barrington at Hampton Court. But about the pictures. A splendid Newfoundland, rescuing a child from drowning, would throw your dog-loving husband into a fit of enthusiasm—‘Saved’ it is called; and you would be as ready to cry over the forlorn ragged robin in ‘Home and the Homeless,’ as he would be to cheer that honourable member of the Humane Society. ‘The Prayer of Faith,’ a Spanish scene, is beautiful, the doleful ‘Death of Chatterton’ exquisitely painted, but the most pathetic picture of all to my mind, is ‘The Scapegoat,’ driven out into the wilderness—but I will not attempt to describe it—I wish you could see the sunset of it on the hills of Judea! Some people advance, give it a perplexed stare, and turn aside with a contemptuous smirk. ‘The Abandoned,’ a wreck at sea, by Stansfield, is very grand, but the picture I should most dearly like to possess is Linnell’s ‘Harvest Sunset.’ And O, my poor dear Clare with the

toothache, 'Toothache in the Middle Ages,' if we believe Mr. Marks, must have been just the same ludicrous acute martyrdom which we are all able to bear so philosophically for our friends."

"All the world was in the Park yesterday to see the Queen and welcome home the Guards. Poor fellows, it made my heart ache to watch them tramp by, so worn, so weary, some with their banners riven to tatters—honourable tatters! The people gave them an enthusiastic reception, and some had energy and good-will to be glad, but I noticed many ranks that never raised head or eye from the dusty hot road. We heard that they were aggrieved because the Germans had been preferred to the honour of attending upon the Queen at Aldershot. If the Germans were preferred it was an unkind blunder. Our soldiers deserve well of their country, the very best Queen and people can do for them; and these honours and rewards that seem so trivial to philosophers are, in fact, most precious where substantial recompence is impossible. What jewel would shine like the Cross of Valour on the breast of Prince Charming and his peers? We must be in London, dear Mrs. Gresham and I, to see our hero decorated.

"To-morrow we go to Hampton Court: the limes are in blossom, and it will be delicious. We take only Janet—Grandmother Barrington has not room for more of us. Perhaps papa will run down while I am there, but it is only a *perhaps*—he has so many engagements. None, however, he has solemnly promised me, that shall interfere with his being at

Stoneleigh for our fête in celebration of Peace. I know he will be sadly impatient to be off to the German waters when the season is over, so we must be quick about it. Prince Charming is to travel from town with him, and to have his quarters at the Manor House. I shall have a thousand and one tales to tell you when we meet which I have not had time to write——”

CHAPTER VIII.

When the Limes were in Blossom.

FELICIA'S frequent and lively references to her Prince Charming prepared me to expect a grave communication when I saw her. But Helen had said nothing, nor had any suggestion reached me from Ringwood. Perhaps the matter looked serious, and all concerned were afraid of precipitating difficulties by indulging in idle or premature words. Mrs. Bethell and Miss Reed came back to the Dower House; I paid them my compliments on their return, and heard many pretty things of Felicia, but not a hint of what I expected. The same discreet silence was observed at Ringwood, where Mr. Tom Bethell had at last established himself and family for a permanency. Rose and Blanche came home when Felicia went to Hampton Court, but never an allusion made they to Prince Charming. The avoidance of his name increased my anxiety, my curiosity; but I reflected that in a week or ten days, if I could wait so long, both might be appeased.

Meanwhile, I knew that Felicia was happy, for she wrote to me every day. She had a gift with her pen in familiar writing, and it seemed a necessity to her to employ it. The history of her visit

to Hampton Court when the limes were in blossom, I shall again leave to her own telling.

“Here we are, Cousin Clare, safe out of the reek and the tumult, with Grandmamma Barrington, in that grand old royal lodging, like a jar of *pot-pourri*, where the book-closet is, and the old novels written in letters and bound in white and gold that you have heard me talk about. It smells sweet and spicy, musty and fusty as it always did, and as I sit at this spider-legged rickety table, the biggest of a nest of spider-legged rickety tables, each one more spider-like and rickety than another, I fall into my childish trick of ‘fancying,’ and am not myself at all, but a heroine of one of the last century romances, inditing my adventures and my confidences to the dear friend and sister of my soul. To keep up the illusion, you should preserve my letters in a casket of sandal-wood, where your posterity may discover them a hundred years hence, and in the midst of their modern dissipations, may wonder at the history of a rich young lady of fashion of this present age, much as I wonder at the history of the elegant Miss Byron and her contemporaries. Grandmamma protests that the old novels are infinitely more amusing than any she meets with now-a-days, but I don’t think so, for I have dipped into one or two, and there is nobody amusing except Lovelace, the wicked hero, of whom, says Mrs. Gresham, the less I know the better. She prescribes me ‘Emma’ in lieu of ‘Clarissa;’ but Emma and her friends are prosy, selfish and dull, exactly like the people we see and

hear every day, and I want to be taken amongst noble strangers in a story-book—so I am just gone to Castlewood with Henry Esmond. If you have not yet made his delightful acquaintance, pray let me introduce him.

“One may read and write here all day, it is so quiet. Scarcely anybody comes to call, and grand-mamma has no carriage to drive about. What a lovely old lady she is, and how fond of papa, and of me for his sake! She has given me a little pearl necklace and brooch with a pendant and ear-drops—the pink velvet lining of the case is faded quite yellow. ‘My darling, they are the last of my treasures, and I have kept them for thee,’ she said, and her sweet old eyes were twinkling full of tears. Yes, she loves us, but I question whether she does not love better her game of cards—like the last century ladies again who ruined themselves at play.

“Has not somebody written an essay on the influence of the dwelling? I move with an air more stately and a step more measured about this palace of refuge for poor nobility. I feel that there is a very shady side to high life, but its decay is still in honour here. Some of my own people are on this shady side, and must go softly there to their days’ end. Grandmamma has had many sorrows, many hard trials and losses, but her clouded evening is not altogether melancholy. She talks to me by the long hour of her troubles, always finishing with one assurance: ‘However, my darling, we have nothing to blush for, no disgrace to make us hide our heads. I could have gone to Court with thee amongst the

proudest, if thy Grandmother Bethell had not claimed the better right.' And she is calm and happy enough except on the days when Uncle Ralph comes down.

"I cannot love Uncle Ralph—he must be the original person who threw his slipper at the nightingales to make them leave off singing. He threw his slipper (metaphorically) at me yesterday, when I was carolling an air by the open window—you know how I carol without ever thinking. Grandmamma pleaded for me: 'Have patience with the poor child—she has a most sweet voice.' 'She need not let everybody hear it,' snarled my gracious kinsman—And there, behold, was Prince Charming coming up the terrace—he had heard it—Uncle Ralph had seen *him*. 'You are all of one sort, you women, you *sirens*,' he went on; 'here is our pretty painted innocence, practising her new version of an old song—do you know it, Miss Felicity? "Whistle, and I'll come to thee, my lad"—Now she has put on her modesty'—Blushing he calls *paint*,—I know I blushed and looked quite vexed and shame-faced as Prince Charming was ushered in——"

"I am going to report you a conversation.—'Uncle Ralph, why are you so bitter against women?' 'That is a shrewish inquiry, Miss Felicity—am I *so* bitter?' 'Yes—you say the most ill-natured things that ever I heard.' 'Then you don't keep your ears open to the voices of your own sex.' '*Oh!* do *we* speak against one another?' *Don't* you?' Uncle Ralph walked off with that significant retort-question, and I fell a-thinking—not to much purpose, how-

ever. Presently he walked back. 'Well, Miss Felicity, have you re-considered your case?' 'No—I am sure the women I know speak well of women.' 'The women *you* know! Who wrote that famous portrait of *The Modern Miss* which I caught you studying with a face of flame?' 'Some man whom a woman has cruelly ill-used.' 'Reverse your nouns; say: some woman whom a man has cruelly ill-used.' 'The more shame for her then! but are you *sure*?' 'Quite sure—it is the finest feather in her cap.' 'What is she like?' 'Like nobody but herself—not like the women *you* know.' 'What would make her do it?' 'A bad passion for notoriety, I suppose—and money.' 'Where can she have got her ideas from?' 'She must have evolved them out of her own moral consciousness: she is herself a modern miss.' 'Not young!' 'She tries to seem so—' 'Horrid old thing! I always thought those portraits of women were written by some very unpleasant man in imitation of La Bruyère, and in my own mind I called him Mephistopheles in the pulpit.' 'And you *read* them? Ah, Felicity, and so they *pay*. If Mephistopheles was advertised to give a course of Lent Lectures you would all flock to hear him. Mephistopheles preaching morality would draw more ladies of fashion than another St. Paul.' 'Who is insinuating evil of women *now*?' 'My dear little girl, don't try to talk of what you don't understand. You have *too* much curiosity: so had your mother Eve, and you remember what came of it. If you must have fruit of the tree of knowledge, get Mrs. Gresham to pluck it for you, and see that it is

not tainted. But if you will be advised by an old cynic, you will wait till it is ripe, and drops into your lap.'

"That was all I got by my attack on Uncle Ralph, and I am still as much as ever in the dark as to why he hates women. For he does hate us—and he despises us too."

"Next autumn I mean to plant an avenue of lime-trees along the raised pathway that goes down to the river from Burn-Bridge. I am in love with the lime-trees here: the scent of them and the humming of bees in the crowded blossoms is like Paradise. Grandmamma Barrington is so good to me, so indulgent—there is no one equal to her but papa. 'If I had the casting of thy fortune, my treasure, it should be a very happy one,' she said to me last night, and then she asked what fortune I should choose. I could not answer her. If you were a girl again, what fortune would you choose, Cousin Clare? To be married for love—to be Arthur's wife? But what silly nonsense I am writing! Grandmamma kissed me, and said she could guess. Oh, she *is* so kind!

"It was a very hot day, too hot to ride or walk, but in the evening we went out on the river. The twilight was still flushed and rosy when the moon began to rise. I wish I could describe to you the beauty of it! I love river scenery—the long reeds and grasses, and the old trees on the banks, dipping their branches in the cool dark water. I have painted several vignettes for my big journal here—you shall

see them when I come home. As it gloomed towards night, they made me sing: Prince Charming has a voice too, and presently we sang all together; we were five in the boat, for Uncle Ralph was with us. Papa says I am taming the savage beast in Uncle Ralph, and indeed, I think he is a shade more civil to me since I rebuked him for his bearishness towards women. He has actually given me his word that he will come to Stoneleigh! But lest you should expect a deeper reformation than is the case, and be disappointed, let me quote you a pretty speech he made me this morning—perhaps the prettiest he has made me yet: ‘Yes, Miss Felicity, I have taken your measure; you are not so wise or good as you fancy, but neither are you such a selfish empty fool as most of your sex. But you may turn out a heartless jade yet! I advise no man to trust you—the very best of you are often the worst for coining virtuous reasons to excuse their faithlessness.’

“Can you imagine me untrue to any one I love? I would tear my heart out of my bosom if I believed that it could ever play me false!”

“What is Prince Charming doing at Hampton Court? How should I tell? Ask him yourself, Cousin Clare, if you wish to know. Perhaps he is here for his health, perhaps for his business, perhaps for his pleasure: is it for me to inquire of Prince Charmings what they do here, there, anywhere? Sometimes he rides—and he has ridden through Bushy amongst the chestnuts with me; sometimes he walks—and I have met him twice or thrice under

the lime-trees towards sunset, when grandmamma goes out with her silver stick and me to breathe the air; sometimes he dines—for I have a recollection of him at our round table, carving the pullet that else I must have carved; sometimes (too often) he smokes a cigar, for I have scented him coming along the terrace when the breeze was favourable, before he was in sight; sometimes he talks—anon he is silent; sometimes he is contented to sit still; sometimes he has a restless fit, and is for going to London next day. But he has not gone yet—perhaps he will go on Thursday. And towards seven o'clock, when the sun is red on the tops of the Great Bethell Oaks, if you are looking out from the Langhill, you may see me come whirling along the high-road to the Manor.—Shall I not be glad?"

And was not I glad too! I had a wave of the hand, and a shower of smiles and nods from the carriage-window as it passed the Rectory gate, and later in the evening, when the bairns were in bed, and Arthur had gone to his study for an hour, I ran across to the Manor to kiss my sister and dear Felicia, and to hear what news.

CHAPTER IX.

Idle Hours.

EVERY day at this time seemed to increase the lustre of Felicia's beauty. When she came into a room she brightened it with her fair presence. I think it must have been the happiness that radiated from her, the infectious gaiety and light-heartedness of youth. I expected a little air of shyness with me after her letters, but there was nothing of the kind. She took my face between her hands, kissed me on either cheek, and challenged me to say whether London and late hours had made hers less blooming.

She was full of chat. I could not have edged in an inquiry if I had been ever so desirous, and her lively disengaged manner almost convinced me that my anticipations had out-run the truth. She brought me her big journal with the new vignettes from Hampton Court to inspect, and gave me several rapid sketches of her sentiments on things in general that had happened since she went away, and at last fell on the theme of the Peace Festival that was to be at Stoneleigh.

"The manor will be crowded to the roof: papa is to bring lots of gentlemen, Uncle Ralph *may* come, and Captain Gresham and his friend Major Trefusis are sure."

“No ladies?” said I.

“There are plenty of ladies in the neighbourhood—George Sylvester’s sisters, the Claylands girls, my cousins from Ringwood, and any number from Gladestone. What I want is that the poor people should enjoy themselves, and to make the day so that the village children shall remember it. I have brought a case of medals to give them. We sketched a programme—I’ll show it to you to-morrow; perhaps Mr. Gower may have something to suggest. But papa entrusts our part entirely to me.”

I was left to my own discernment for the second person in the *we* who sketched the programme. It was not Helen, for I gave her an interrogative glance, and she responded with a negative movement of her head—it was then Prince Charming. I said to myself that I would ask no more questions, but would wait until I saw them together. I began to doubt my own past conclusions, and to revolve them again in my mind; and though I saw Helen twice again between that evening and Mr. Barrington’s arrival with his train of gentlemen, by tacit consent we refrained from all allusion to Captain Gresham—a very severe piece of self-denial on my part. With Felicia the avoidance of his name was easier, strange as that may seem. She could write in play what she could not talk of to my face without blushing in earnest, and with the new light that was breaking in upon me it would have been unkind to rally her. I think she was relieved to find that I let her alone.

My perplexity was not to be very long drawn

out. Arthur and I dined at the Manor on the evening of Mr. Barrington's return. There was a large party, so large a party, with such a preponderance of young people, that somebody proposed a lawn-dance afterwards, which was joyfully acceded to. There were delightful opportunities for any lovers amongst them to prosecute their love-making, and some were not slow to avail themselves of the occasion. Mr. Courteney and Blanche Bethell danced together, and then strolled off in the shade somewhere out of sight; and Tom Claylands was assiduous in trying to draw Rose away from the crowd, but Rose was disdainful. The night was warm and clear, starlight and lamp-lit, on the terrace, but in the grovy seclusions grey with the summer twilight that is never darkness the whole night round. Several of the gentlemen had lit their cigars, and there was plenty of laughter and noise amongst the groups in front of the house where I stayed, sitting below one of the open drawing-room windows. Helen was playing for the dancers in the music-room adjoining, and between the dances she came and leant out and talked to me.

She asked me once where Felicia was. At the moment Felicia was stepping across the lawn with swift, graceful motion to meet Prince Charming; she made him a sweeping low curtsey and offered her hand. He took it with an air and a bow as merry-mocking, laid his other hand on his heart, then whirled her round in a waltz. The lawn was soon covered with waltzers to a melting tune, and they kept it up till they were breathless. Felicia and the

Prince had vanished when it was over, but a few minutes after she re-appeared alone, and came and seated herself by me.

"Tired, Felicia?" said I, for I was growing drowsy myself. She did not answer me, did not seem to hear me.

She sighed, and sighed again, looking on at the next dance that was set; I could feel the tremor and excitement that were in her, though she neither moved nor spoke. There was an interruption of her agitated thoughts.

"Oh, Felicia, here you are! come along—this is my quadrille," cried the cheerful voice of George Sylvester advancing.

"Let me off this time, George—you don't mind letting me off?" pleaded she in an urgent tone. "There's Rosy disengaged." George said no more, but sped to Rosy and took her.

While the quadrille was still in progress Captain Gresham came by that way. He saw Felicia I know, but he passed as if he did not see her. Then he came back, and though they neither danced together again, nor spoke so far as I saw, each kept the other constantly in sight. I began to understand it. There was love, and conscious love on both sides, but on his a self-restraint that did him honour. I think that evening discovered to Felicia the principles that strove with his inclinations, and that she was suddenly alarmed and fearful lest the happiness that had been revealed to her should prove only a mirage. A thousand fluctuations trouble the tender soul in such a case as hers. She had heard it said

continually how girls of fortune are sought for their money, and how men of independent, proud spirit avoid them. And her Prince Charming had the pride of Lucifer. He had many faults, many qualities impossible to praise; but he was very loveable with them all.

The next morning I received a visit from Captain Gresham. With his strength, he was recovering his beauty—nobody could object to the mark of the sword-cut, which had severed his left eye-brow and gashed his cheek to the ear, as a blemish; in fact, it was not at all disfiguring when one remembered where he had got it. He was a fine-looking person, then and always, one of those men who carry an acceptable letter of introduction in their faces. I recollect thinking as he sat on the grass that morning how sweet his expression was when he laughed and kissed my little girl, who plunged into his arms without any invitation, and how repellent it became a minute or two after when he was speaking of certain circumstances that displeased him. He betrayed none of the vagaries popularly attributed to a man in love, but was perfectly cool, measured, and self-possessed in manner and in conversation. He did not name Felicia, neither did I, directly, but much that we said was undoubtedly allusive.

“If we are to have a settled peace, I’ll exchange and go to India; nothing bores me like garrison duty at home,” said he.

“You deserve a longer rest after your campaigning; and do you think India will suit you?”

“Any place will suit me out of the way of

worry. This life is not my life, you very well know, and it cannot go on; Helen reminds me that it cannot: I know without reminding—my mother is not any more liberal than she was. India may be dull, I daresay it is dull, but it will be a dulness that I have not tried—and there is sport.”

“Don’t be in haste to go—why should you? A year in England surely you can endure—we should all be sorry to see you leave. Your health can hardly be considered quite re-established yet.”

He looked at me with grave inquiry; his eyes were the most changeful for a man that ever I saw, and windows of his thoughts always. I apprehended that grave subtle look, and kept the blinds of mine down, lest I should show what I ought not. He was baffled. “Why should any of you be sorry to see me leave? Canterbury or Calcutta, what does it matter where I am, if I am out of reach? If Trefusis and I can get an exchange together, Christmas will not see us here.”

“Is it so bad with you as that?” this was a foolish speech; it slipped out unawares, as foolish speeches have a trick of doing.

“Yes, it is as bad with me as that,” he replied, this time without looking at me. He was looking straight before him, and seeing nothing—unless it were a reluctant sacrifice.

We were silent for several minutes; if he had continued to speak it would have been in confession, and just on the brink of it, I felt scared. It was a welcome diversion for me when Mr. Ralph Barrington showed his yellow visage through the

bushes that shaded the corner of the lawn where we were, and invited himself to join us.

"What are you two confabulating over with such rueful countenances?" he inquired, displacing my work-basket on the garden-seat that he might sit down himself.

"About the policy of my exchanging for India," answered Captain Gresham readily.

"Very wise step. I always wonder how you young paladins survive the laborious inaction of country quarters—not that an Indian station, in quiet times, is much livelier, by all accounts."

"You would advise me to go, then?"

"Nay, my good fellow, don't put words into my mouth—I advise no man on his private affairs. How should I know what reasons you may have for wishing to put half the world betwixt you and home? The Jews—an entanglement——"

"I have no reasons of either nature."

"A temptation to fly."

"That is nearer the mark."

"Fly it then—especially if it concerns a woman; be sure if you play with it, you will fall upon mischief; women are the very devil for mischief, always were. *I* know them!"

Now it was a supreme bit of affectation in Mr. Ralph Barrington to profess so deep and bad a knowledge of women; for the only woman with whom his name had ever been connected was a good and beautiful person whom, with a selfish vanity which had been justly mortified in the results, he had tried to hold on and off for several

years, unwilling to relinquish the freedom and pleasures of bachelorhood, and equally unwilling to lose the prospect of ultimate happiness with her when he was tired of his own way. She tired of them first, gave him his *congé* and married elsewhere. Since that event he had consistently and on all occasions abused the sex. I have noticed it in other men and in women too, that when they have been most in fault themselves, they are most prone to shower a general vituperative blame and condemnation on the other side.

"If Captain Gresham be wise he will judge us as he finds us," said I, defying my cynical kinsman. "There is no experience less worth a man's borrowing than another man's experience of women."

"Cousin Clare, allow me to compliment you on a very remarkable degree of shrewdness. Captain Gresham is still young; he believes all the poetical fables that have ever been written, said or sung in your praise—you may practise on his credulity yet to any extent. And the deception is so fascinating while it lasts that, perhaps, we old foxes who have found you out, ought to be on honour to keep your secrets."

"Your attack is cowardly! You forget that in the process of learning our secrets, you give us the key to your own. If we had the same liberty of speech as you and the same unscrupulousness in proclaiming our dismal knowledge, could none of us tell tales of you?"

"What a vixen! Lord, what a vixen!" cried the misogynist, laughing and raising his hands.

Captain Gresham laughed too, but did not take his part. "Never mind, Mrs. Gower, I am on your side. I have the highest respect for women, and the liveliest admiration. I don't believe there is a bad one that a man has not made."

"Ah, Gresham wishes to pay his court: he has some deep mysterious game on hand, and wants the aid of the sex to help him win it," retorted Mr. Ralph Barrington, and his eyes, like sparks of steel, shot a keen but not ill-natured suspicion at the younger man. Captain Gresham returned his glance with an intrepid frankness, but his colour deepened, and he was at a loss for a rejoinder, though the insinuation was perfectly untrue.

"It seems that you entertain as low an opinion of your own sex as of ours, Cousin Ralph," said I. "If *we* are rogues, *you* are knaves and fools."

"So we are, where the rogues are concerned; far be it from me to deny it! And here come three as choice rogues as any nature ever invented for our perversion—roguery is bred in *you*, mind; *we* have to learn our knavish tricks." It was impossible to be even with Mr. Ralph Barrington; he invariably got the last word.

The three rogues he espied were Felicia, Rose and Blanche, affectionately intertwined, advancing over the lawn. They had come from a walk on the Langhill. In the country, amongst idle people, there is always a tendency to gravitate to one spot. It was luncheon-time now; Arthur joined us, and I gave them an impromptu feast on the lawn, after

warning them that it would be a feast of cottage fare. They took it, and were thankful, and stayed till four o'clock, literally to get rid of time. Then Felicia had to go, and dress for her ride; and she reminded her Uncle Ralph, as she was preparing to leave us, that he had promised her his company this afternoon.

"Make it to-morrow, Felicy—it is too hot," said he excusing himself. "I am an old fellow, soon knocked up."

"Ah, that is always the way with papa and you," she began plaintively, when Captain Gresham, speaking with cheerful alacrity, said how glad he should be if he might attend her.

"You have *my* permission, be off with you," said Mr. Ralph Barrington; while Felicia looked up at him shyly and brightened, and said in a voice now blithe enough that it was tiresome riding day after day alone; and they went away together—"as happy as rogue and fool could be," the misogynist would have said, if he had given his thoughts vent. Soon after their departure I dismissed my other visitors, for I had my duties in the village to do, and it was now sufficiently cool to walk about with pleasure.

Felicia had entreated us to go over to the Manor evening by evening, if we could spare the leisure, for her papa was a great lover of society, and the more people he saw about him the better pleased he was. It was not much to require, for hours were late there, and our day's work done almost

before their revels began. She seemed happy since her ride, very happy, I thought, and Prince Charming did not belie the pretty pseudonym she had conferred upon him. There was a dinner-party again, the guests staying in the house, and another selection of agreeable neighbours who lived within a drive. Felicia told me that she had arranged some entertainment for each night.

"For if papa is left to himself, he gets bored, and then away he goes," she said. "And he likes to see his friends and acquaintances in his own house much better than to go to theirs. He hates whatever gives him trouble—so does Uncle Ralph—so did grandpapa Barrington, and that is why dear old grandmamma has to live at Hampton Court. It is lucky that I have a strain of the Bethells in me, and want to be stirring sometimes, or we should have come to a dead-lock about our Peace Festival. What a clog indifferentism is! one can make faster progress against a hearty opposition!"

She was right there. More than once it had seemed as if this celebration on which her heart was set would fall through. Mr. Barrington was a provokingly selfish person, where his own ease and peace were involved. "What is the good of it?" "Who will care to come?" "It will be a world of annoyance for no profit." "I cannot imagine what possesses you to make such a fuss about the poor people," "The gardens will be trampled to pieces," "The men will get drunk," "I hope you don't expect me to fatigue myself as president at the feast"—these and many more such trivial tiresome ob-

jections she had to overcome. "Dear papa," she said at last, "I expect nothing from you but what belongs to your position as Mr. Barrington of Stoneleigh. You will exert yourself for a few hours to support that—you *promised* me."

I wonder how often Felicia had to plead "you *promised* me." Mr. Barrington was always ready to promise, but the time of fulfilment often found him remiss. He wished the whole business over; and what even I had not anticipated from him, he expressed a hope that there would be no unnecessary expense—a sentiment that deeply chagrined his daughter.

Fortunately, all was now arranged. Arthur had revised the programme which Felicia and Prince Charming had originated. There was to be a procession from the school with banners and music; a short service in church, the orthodox dinner under a vast tent, games, a general tea, and a dance after; and bells all day, with a bonfire at night, and a grand display of rockets and Roman candles.

CHAPTER X.

A Village Festival.

IF the day had been made to order for our festival it could not have been more propitious. When I looked out from my window, the grass was glittering with dew, the leaves were shining with moisture, a white haze was exhaling from the un-reaped cornfields and the rich meadows towards the river. The dense foliage of the Great Oaks looked full of cool shade, and all was so hushed and quiet that it felt like a beautiful Sunday morning. There were no sounds from the wheel-wright's yard, nor from the blacksmith's forge; no farmers' wains upon the road, nor any stir of labour at all. Felicia had decreed a general holiday, and she had Queen's weather for it; the dear child was ever fortunate in her holidays for other people.

The first break in the tranquillity came from overhead, from the church-tower. We had a famous peal of bells, and as the ringers warmed to their work, I was not unthankful to have to forsake my own roof and go elsewhere. In the night, or since the dawn, had sprung up around the Manor a grove of green arches, flags, patriotic sentiments in flowers, the great tent and all the machinery of the feast.

Felicia was on the lawn with George Sylvester. She came forward to meet me, her hands outstretched in eager welcome, and looking so blithe and lovely in her snow-drop costume of white and green. Her anxieties were at an end, and she was now all at leisure.

"Everybody has obeyed orders exactly," she announced. "Everything is in train to go well, and we have no more to do until it is time to walk to the school, and set the children in procession for church."

"Therefore I propose that we should sit down in the cool, and reserve our forces for the busier hours of the day," said sensible George, who had shared with Felicia the chief labour of organizing the festival.

We sat down accordingly under the aromatic shade of the old cedars at the east end of the house. Rose and Blanche, attired like their cousin, joined us, and we discussed coming events. The Bethell girls were fluent talkers, like their father, and for ever so long they kept up the ball with George almost to the exclusion of Felicia. I perceived that she was waiting her opportunity to speak, and at last, she got it. "Oh, Cousin Clare, I had forgotten to tell you—such good news, such an unexpected addition to our glories!" she began, addressing me across the circle, when Blanche, impatient to hear her own voice again, resolutely interrupted.

"Let *me* tell! Last night Felicity remembered Old Crotchets—Uncle Alfred said: 'Don't ask him, he will bore us all to extinction,' but this amiable Fe-

licity, who cannot bear to wound anybody's feelings, declared that it would be too ungracious to leave him out of her first public entertainment. And she has her reward: he wrote her three lines—he would certainly come, and might he bring his brother James—you know who that is? General Sir James Cartwright. Think of the honour! Two Crimean heroes! was there ever such luck as Felicity's?"

"It is a pity though that Prince Charming's laurels should be so overshadowed," said Rose, with that slight inflection of the voice which conveys a sneer. Who gave her licence to use that name? They all seemed to be familiar with it, however, and Felicia manifested no self-consciousness.

"Why should his laurels be overshadowed?" said she. "What rivalry can be possible between a veteran like General Cartwright and a young soldier whose distinction rests on a conspicuous instance of personal valour? When Prince Charming has fought in as many wars as the General, he will be as famous." I liked to hear Felicia give her opinion freely. Rose was conceited; she had somehow achieved a reputation for wisdom and sagacity, which she was rather too fond of airing for the benefit of her young friends.

At this moment Prince Charming himself came in view, sauntering towards us with Felicia's white umbrella up. He was in splendid good-humour this morning, and his beautiful hostess and he spoke to each other with the pleasantest assumption of mutual understanding. I was glad that he was not going to spoil Felicia's happy day. He had apparently

given himself leave since their ride together to be as engaging as time and circumstances would allow. He loved her, and there was a sweet wistfulness in her eyes as she looked up to him, that betrayed much more than she was conscious of. The Bethell girls exchanged glances of much significance. Some people might be blind, but they were not, and George Sylvester was not. He had found them out, and like the honest good fellow he was, showed himself only generous. There was a truer devotion to her in his heart now than in the other man's; but he was of a very different disposition, and discerning Felicia's preference, he was not likely to stand in Captain Gresham's way, or to vex her tender soul overmuch with the spectacle of his own disappointment. She made frank use of him, like the best of brothers; it was the relative position in which they had grown up, and Felicia had no idea of his desiring any other. Yet for all this, Captain Gresham was less cordial with George than George was willing to be with him; it seemed that he was jealous of that habit of intimacy which gave George a hundred little advantages and privileges that he could lay no claim to. George made no sign of observing this; possibly he did not observe it. They had been friends a long while, and his was the peace fullest, least exacting of tempers:—a blessed distribution of feeling as it turned out; with a more eager and passionate character, he would have had a world more to suffer through what afterwards befel.

The clamour of the bells ceased suddenly. "That is the sign—time to go to the school; now, George,

you must come with me—you too, Cousin Clare: Rose and Blanche will not tire themselves, I know,” said Felicia, rising with alacrity.

“It is of no good to heat ourselves by toiling down the hill, just to toil up again,” Blanche acquiesced.

“They were to make a rough sketch of a procession in the road for us to give it the finishing touches—where is my flag? You carry it, George. Yes, I have a flag, I head the march,” Felicia said. Her cousins laughed, and thought the Lady of the Manor might have left that to the school-mistress, or to me, the parson’s wife. But the fact was Felicia liked to make regulations of her own amongst the children; she knew them every one, and had a high sense of her responsibility to all growing up on her territory. Nor was she in the least disposed to resign her own duties to other persons. I judged it an admirable trait in her, but some of her friends called it sheer love of authority and management. It was not that, certainly: it was filling her place, doing her business.

“Have you no commission for me?” asked Prince Charming.

“You may come with us, if you please,” said Felicia. Again Rose and Blanche exchanged a meaning look; they were far too unreserved in this sort of telegraphy, for good manners.

Captain Gresham would have been as well out of the way; he went, however, and rested in the shadow of the school-house porch while we marshalled the children in line. When they were all ready, Felicia took the lead, and in the hymn of

victory which they sang as they marched, her voice sounded like a silver trumpet above the pipes of the little children. George Sylvester was in the van, too, singing like a lark, but Captain Gresham did not condescend to swell the volume of sweet sound, nobly as we set him the example. He fell out of his element, and as he and I brought up the rear of the procession together, he melted away from it into the general throng assembled in the churchyard to see the children arrive. Every one was there from the Manor except Mr. Barrington—he was not fond of church, and thought nothing of setting an example; the dowager with a party from the Dower House was present, and George Sylvester's sisters, escorted by old Mr. Willis, who held by the hand the elder of his two grandsons. Every eye rested with pitiful respect on that little man in black and the old rector. The tenant-farmers had mustered in force with their wives and daughters, and none of the village community were missing except the bed-ridden. Infants in arms had proved no obstacle. Several were there, babes and sucklings, whose mothers had too much spirit to stop at home when the rest of the world were making holiday. Poor young widow Burt was amongst them; she had made an effort to come, not for distraction, but for her dead soldier's sake. She sat by the door through the prayers, fretting softly, but in the middle of Arthur's address, when he alluded to those who had fallen in the war, her grief overcame her, and she stole away. I did not see her at the Manor, but her mother-in-law kept the feast; pride in her lost

son and the praises of her neighbours sustained her. She was a stiff old woman, full of the true English sense of duty, decorum, and religion. The daughter could only dwell on her bereavement, and she was besides fallen out of health.

Felicia was organist that day, and had chosen the brightest music. The bells broke forth again in lusty peals as we left the church with hearts cheered and uplifted; and when they ceased, the rival bands from Gladestone, stationed at opposite extremities of the grounds, that their strains might not interfere with each other, began to play, and gave nobody's spirits time to flag. We each had our cue who were to help in entertaining the village, and mine was to supervise the children, and manœuvre them through the gardens to a grassed alley, where they could sit safe on the turf, and eat pic-nic style the good things awaiting them. The great tent was on the bowling-green, and there George Sylvester was master of the revels. When I came with my numerous flock upon the lawn, Felicia, who was there with Mr. Barrington, receiving their guests, made them halt on the terrace a little while, to regale their astonished eyes with the gay flowers and pretty dresses of the ladies, which delighted them amazingly. Children love a fine show, and the weather was so favourable to display, that it would be hazardous to assert whether the ladies or the flowers were the finest.

There had been several arrivals from a distance during the service, amongst them Mr. Tom Bethell, his handsome wife and handsome second family—all who were firm on their pins, that is (the cradle

was still an institution at Ringwood). The Abershaws, Claylands, and Strangways, came in quick succession, and a host of people from Gladestone, with whom I had very slight or no acquaintance. The most notable of the strangers was Felicia's fortunate acquisition, General Sir James Cartwright, for whom the school-children, to our surprise and amusement, and also much to his own, burst into a shrill, spontaneous cheer. They had heard his name in many a fireside story, and Felicia had said a few words to remind them of it before they went to church; and the redoubtable veteran looked so towering, grand, and white-bearded as he passed in front of them that their admiration could not contain itself. It was an incident to set us laughing, a beginning of good fellowship for the day. The General took kind notice of the children, and I saw him lift little Willis in his arms, and speak to the sad old rector of Bylands of the gallant son whom the fortune of war had robbed him of. And then I moved away with my charge, increased now by my own Jack and Lizzie, the smaller Bethells, some baby Abershaws, and Jenny Sylvester, who was so fond of children that she would come and help me entertain them.

I cannot tell how Felicia managed it, but she had the faculty, more than any one else I ever met, of effacing social hard lines on such an occasion as this, and making everybody feel that their humanity was deeper and more real than the outward and visible insignia of their condition. Rigid people relaxed within the sphere of her influence, and be-

came natural, hearty, genial. She set them the example; and was so sure of the affection and respect of her humble friends that she could be equally cordial to all, gentle and simple.

The elder guests were jovial in the great tent, to judge from the softened cheers that reached us at intervals in our shaded alley, and the young generation were merry, as I can testify from my own experience. They made as pretty an avenue of little figures and fresh little faces of boys and girls as any Lady Bountiful could wish to see. Each had a blue ribbon and a Peace Medal for decoration, and each had a pair of bright eyes lifted up in loving reverent admiration to Felicia as she paced slowly down the alley between the two lines, and Prince Charming after her. She smiled like sweetness itself, and spoke to one and another, and then she paced back again; and in many an affectionate memory of those young things grown-up that sunny picture of her remains as clear as yesterday. I think myself that I can see her now, and Prince Charming watching her with an amused gleam in his eyes that was only half appreciative of the fun. He had no taste for such very unselfish, simple pleasures, and seemed rather to misunderstand his lady-love's radiant enjoyment. If he had not known her so well, he would probably have called this celebration, "popularity hunting"—as her cousin Rose Bethell did. After her progress Felicia took her stand at one end of the avenue, and Jenny Sylvester and I at the other, and a grace was sung. Then the children all sat down again, and we made ourselves busy serving

them with cakes and pasties most delicious. It was a treat to witness their genuine satisfaction in something good to eat. This is a pleasure children savour as keenly as the most refined *gourmand* ex-tant, and for the next twenty minutes it absorbed them wholly.

When I looked round for Felicia again, she and the Prince had disappeared.

There was lunch in the dining-room for the "quality-folk," but a few of them, busy like myself in special departments, evaded that part of the festival, and George Sylvester, like a clever caterer, found out Jenny and me in our alley, and sent a servant with supplies and a message that he and Tom Claylands were coming in a few minutes to share them. They brought Miss Reed, whom George had discovered sitting disconsolate under a tree all alone by herself. Felicia had commissioned him to sweep up those diffident neutrals who would not dine in the tent, and yet could not muster courage to join the select assemblage in the dining-room: there are always some at every mixed gathering of the sort, who, if they are not looked after, go without dinner, and spend a miserable holiday, hungry, thirsty, and, worst of all, in tortures of wounded pride which may last them their lives. George and Tom, good-natured young fellows who were known more or less to everybody, proved capital aids in bringing up the stragglers. Tom told me that they had caught and disposed of them all, he believed.

"The Miss Drouets and their clever brother are under the cedars with the Brewers and Buckrams, and Miss Rigg, our governess. They are probably looking down on her as a poor thing who has to teach, and she is despising them as fat tradesfolks without an H in their composition. So they are all comfortable in their minds, and they have a splendid pigeon-pie and lots beside for the sustentation of their bodies."

"You did not forget sherry, Tom?" cried George in alarm for the credit of the Manor hospitality.

"There was bitter ale in plenty——"

"Go and see that they have sherry, and claret-cup—and grapes, *grapes*, Tom!"

Tom was off like a shot to repair his neglects. He came back almost as quickly, and reported that young Drouet had discovered sherry for the party on his own account, and that they were also in possession of a magnificent pine. "Drouet knows what's what—he has not been ten years a parliamentary reporter without sharpening his wits. The ladies are as lively as possible. Miss Rigg is unbending from her dignified reserve. The discordant elements are all fusing delightfully."

"Bays might like to join them if there is a London newspaper man there—or we could have brought him here—he is a friend of yours, Miss Reed," said George reflectively.

Miss Reed denied the imputation—Mr. Bays was no friend of hers, oh, no!

"The poet Bays is best where he is; he likes to moon about with nobody but his pipe; it is meat,

drink, and inspiration to him," said Tom. "Well, not exactly drink, perhaps," he added, correcting himself. "But he is never quarrelsome in his cups, so never mind."

With consciences at ease, we five now settled down to our little by-plot in the festival, Miss Reed testifying with a gush that she was most happy to find herself in my company. She said she had been looking for me ever since we came out of church. "For you are always good to the waifs and strays and poor dependents, dear Mrs. Gower." I expressed my hope rather coldly that she did not put herself into that category; for I was quite sure she had not been idle in her vocation. If she had been unable to find me, I had not been blind to her presence, slipping from group to group, from place to place, but always keeping Felicia under her observation.

As we regaled George gave us an account of how the feast had gone in the tent—noisily and joyously, and to the exuberant satisfaction of both insiders and outsiders. There had been toasts and healths drunk, and General Cartwright, answering for "The Army," had given great honour to Captain Gresham. "That boy," he called him, "whose valour had made him a hero amongst heroes."

"*Somebody* was pleased," added Tom Claylands, nodding to me. Miss Reed simpered and sighed.

"Who does *somebody* mean?" she inquired.

"You *know*," rejoined Tom.

George said nothing. Jenny opened her eyes wide with curiosity. To-morrow, thought I, the

secret will be out, and all the neighbourhood discussing it.

We fell silent after Tom's indiscreet allusion, and were just about to forsake the fragments of our feast when there appeared suddenly through the bushes close behind us, a small, youngish lady, handsome and well-dressed, a perfect stranger to me. She smiled, colouring and hesitating to advance, but George instantly jumped up, and inquired if she had come out from luncheon.

"No," she said, "I am afraid I have missed everything. I wandered away by myself to the river. There was a boy in an old boat, and it looked so beautiful beyond that I asked him to row me over to see the town and castle."

"It is a mercy that you have got safe back! You must be hungry, I'm sure," said George, and instantly he prepared a place for her, and gave her roast lamb, salad, claret-cup, waiting upon her so assiduously that I imagined them to be intimate friends—only he had forgotten the ceremony of introduction.

Jenny Sylvester and Tom Claylands now went off in quest of more amusement, and when the stranger was provided for and established at her ease, George went too, commending her with a few last words to the care of Miss Reed and myself. She was a quiet little woman, full of intelligence and experience of travel. She spoke with a slightly provincial northern accent, but her voice was cultivated, and her air and manner those of a person in a position of authority, and possessed of much

natural dignity besides. She was leisurely enjoying her luncheon when Mr. Tom Bethell came lounging into the alley, and dropt on the turf amongst us with a supercilious and disgusted air.

"These public days are my aversion," snarled he. "One never knows who one may meet!"

The strange lady looked him over with a soft humorous twinkle in her fine grey eyes, speculating probably who *he* was; for, to a casual acquaintance, Mr. Tom Bethell looked like one of those men who live by horses. His arrival was a sign that the select luncheon was over, and our secluded retreat became open now to constant incursions. Amongst many others who came and went was Mr. Cartwright of Beechcroft (popularly Old Crotchets) accompanied by a large fine-looking man who walked with his hat in his hand, and conversed in a loud animated voice of certain projected railway-works in our neighbourhood.

"Who's this with Old Crotchets?" asked Tom Bethell. "I never saw *him* before."

"That is Falkner, the civil engineer," said the little lady blithely.

"Oh, indeed! I thought he was not a gentleman," muttered Tom Bethell.

"If you were both to sell which do you think would fetch the better price? I fear your friends would have to let you go very cheap in comparison with Robert Falkner. He's my brother," rejoined the lady laughing with a frank good-humour that Tom found it impossible to imitate. His face turned the colour of a mulberry, and every one of us felt

confused except herself. She was not at all so; indeed, the professional reputation of her brother was world-wide, and she might well be proud of him. I don't know what Tom Bethell meant by saying he thought Mr. Falkner was not a gentleman; he was a man of presence so distinguished that in every company where he was unknown by sight, it was sure to be asked, as Tom himself had asked—Who is he?

I was much amused later in the day when our cheap gentleman apprised me in a whisper that Mr. Falkner was actually staying on a visit at *the Duke's*, "One of those engineer-fellows who have been the ruin of the country! But," added he in a mournful cadence, "when the Duke officiates as chairman of a railway company and an iron-working company on his own territory, it is all of a piece that he should entertain snobs at Lowndes Castle. The democracy are fast getting the upper hand in England—it is a terrible state of things to look forward to! We are on the verge of a revolution—mark my words."

The village children had now been conducted to the orchard where they could skip about to the sound of the music, or play any of their common games. The village mothers were there too, vigilant of eyes and tongue. The Langhill was in favour as a place for walking about, and resting in cool shade. There was croquet on the lawns, and cricket in the cricket-field, and pipes for the old men: and the state-rooms of the Manor House were open to

the inspection of all who loved fine pictures, curiosities, and antique furniture. The only apartment closed against the crowd, was Felicia's boudoir, to which she had invited me to go in the afternoon. Helen was to make tea there for her select friends at five o'clock. I was tired and went early, as soon as I was quit of my duty to the children, indeed. The boudoir was empty when I entered it, and I took my ease for a long hour before anybody came; sufficiently amused by watching from the windows the sportive groups on the Langhill, and the gay parties of croquet-players on the lawn.

Lookers-on certainly see most of the game:—I was just quoting this truism apropos of croquet, when Felicia and Prince Charming passed along the terrace together, and Mr. Tom Bethell met them with a demonstratively agreeable air, and tried to engage them in talk. Apparently they had another object in view, for they kept moving on, and he halting, pursuing, retreating, as if he did not know whether, to let them escape, or to go with them. Finally he let them escape, and the next minute he was holding the dowager in conversation. She seemed to treat his communications very lightly, and to waft them off with a dainty flutter of her fingers. The old-lady grandmamma was very brilliant that day, and very proud and fond of Felicia, as none could fail to see who observed them together.

An idea flashed into my mind all in a moment:—this was it. Tom Bethell knows as well as I do

that Captain Gresham and Felicia are on the brink of involving themselves in a *grande passion*. He encourages it—and utters warnings of it. He is really glad that they should do it. And why? Because he knows that obstacles will be put in their way—that Gresham is proud; that Felicia is constant in love, and hindered of marrying where her heart is set, may refuse to marry at all; that she is devoted to her father, capable of vast sacrifices, of what ascetic theorists style “noble acts of self-renunciation,” of what I, being a mere woman, denounce as wrong-headed, one-sided, blind and foolish acts; almost always fruitful of misery to the doer, and barren of good to those on whose behalf they are done. I was profoundly musing on this revelation when Helen came up behind me unperceived, and offered me a penny for my thoughts. I gave her them for nothing.

“How is it that we have made up our minds to anticipate for Felicia a life of disappointments?” said she. “We have done so. I reason against it, and yet I cannot help feeling that sorrow is being sown for her.”

“They are selfish, her people; they deserve no sacrifice, least of all her father. I hope she will convince them at a pinch, that she has a will of her own.”

Just then Felicia entered alone. She was looking beautiful and happy as the day, with a wistful softness in her eyes. She came up and kissed me, blushing, and I asked her: “What now?” but she went out again without answering. Helen and I

looked one at the other, and Helen said: "She walks on air."

We thought more than we talked until Janet came in with the tea-equipage, closely followed by the dowager and Lady Cartwright, with the General. Next arrived Felicia and Rose and others, until soon the boudoir was filled and overflowing into the gallery. Miss Reed perched up in a window-seat commanded a view of the whole company. I would have given a penny for *her* thoughts many times that day. After this early refreshing tea, some of the guests prepared to take leave. Amongst the first to go were Mr. Falkner and his sister.

"Come Kitty, I want to catch the seven o'clock train to London at Gladestone," I heard him whisper to her, and as "Kitty" was, at the moment, in conversation with me, I went downstairs with her to the carriage. On the steps was standing Miss Colquhoun, a lady-preacher of note to navvies and soldiers, a large, handsome personage, to me very formidable, whom I never encountered if I could help it. But we were civil when we did meet—her civility being blended with a slight contempt of me as frivolous and not sufficiently parsonic for a parson's wife. As Mr. Falkner appeared she bowed most graciously. He glanced at her, and bowed again, not recognizing her apparently.

"Miss Colquhoun—the lady at the mission-house," and she, introducing herself benignantly.

Mr. Falkner bowed once more: "You want to get home—shall we give you a lift?" suggested he,

at the same time assisting his sister to her seat in the carriage.

Miss Colquhoun intimated her acceptance of the offer, but did not stir a foot towards it; instead she began to make a speech, deprecatory, apologetic, diffuse as her manner was. "Kitty" resented it. She evidently knew nothing of our female light of the world, for she knitted her brows, and exclaimed in a prompt voice: "Never mind talking: jump in; tide and train wait for no man." Miss Colquhoun stopt, stared, obeyed, and was whirled out of sight and hearing suddenly.

O, thought I, for a Miss Falkner often to abridge your discourses! For Miss Colquhoun was a burden to us; an honour and glory, I don't deny, but still a burden from her excess of virtue, and her inexhaustible mission for meddling and doing good.

The departures were continuous after this until all the gentry were gone except those who were lodged at the Manor. "It has been a perfect day," Felicia murmured with a happy sigh as I said good-night. "I suppose you will not go up to the bonfire?" No, I said, I was too tired to climb the hill, but I should see it from my window. And so I did, blazing until the morning. And this was how we celebrated the peace at Stoneleigh.

CHAPTER XI.

At the Dower House.

THE next day the Manor House was almost deserted; only Uncle Ralph remained of the visitors, and he left at the end of the week with Mr. Barrington, on his way to Homburg. Felicia kept her happy face through all: she had the talisman which charms a solitude into a golden dreamland. Prince Charming was no further off yet than Bylands, where he was spending a few days with his widowed sister Mrs. Willis. It was quite natural that he should bring her over to call on Felicia, and that the call should be lengthened out into an afternoon together; and perhaps it was quite as natural, that Felicia and her lover, favoured by opportunity, should come to a true understanding of each other's sentiments. She told me afterwards in not many words. He was about to leave her—perhaps he read in her wistful eyes an invitation to linger—and he told her all that was in his heart. I have doubted since whether he would have found the courage even *then*, he had not been so sure that she had given him her own.

Before we slept that night Helen and I both knew what had happened, and Felicia had promised

us that she would confide in her grandmamma Bethell, and write on the morrow to her father, of whose indulgence she seemed to entertain no question.

“Papa will be thankful to turn me over to another master—it will save him trouble,” she gaily asserted; and then she besought me to drive with her to the Dower House the next day—to give her a countenance.

It was rather provoking when we arrived to find the Ringwood girls there, who laid forcible hands on Felicia, and bore her off to croquet: she not so loth to go as at another time she might have been. The dowager undertook my entertainment, and to my scarcely dissembled dismay, began at once upon the great business that had brought us there—from another point of view, of course. I let her talk on without interruption until she paused of her own accord: for I felt my position awkward enough, as may be imagined.

“Dear Mrs. Gower, you are the very person I wanted to see! Reed has been filling my ears ever since breakfast with stories of Felicia having fallen overhead in love with yesterday’s hero, Captain Gresham! I am horrified! Such a match *never* would be allowed, you know; and if there be a beginning of a partiality, we must all combine quietly to ignore it—eh? Reed, with her tactics, would drive at it until the faintest impression might be made indelible. Felicia, like all girls, wants careful management. She is susceptible, and will fall in love and out of love a dozen times before she settles. I have no patience

with Reed—old-maidish thing who does not know what she is talking about any more than a baby.” Mrs. Bethell conned my visage shrewdly as she spoke. Amongst Miss Reed’s suggestions had probably been one that she should sound me as the head-quarters of information. Being forced to answer, I took up my parable boldly.

“It is a pity if love may not have its way in Felicia’s case,” I said. “What real objection is there to Captain Gresham? She is a great fortune, but he has personal distinction to set against it: and for disposition, taste, temper, beauty, no two in the world could be more equally yoked.”

“Ah, you are romantic! You would encourage the silly child—Reed says you have encouraged her, and are to blame, you and your sister, for whatever may happen.”

“Miss Reed is too clever by half. Felicia asked nobody’s leave to fall in love——”

“Love! what nonsense! How long does it last?”

“It lasts some of us our lives. It lasted Felicia’s mother her life, and stole from her many a sorrow——”

“And made her many. Yes, my poor Lucilla loved her husband—but was he worth her devotion?”

“That is not the question: she was the happier for it; with no other person could she have been so happy as with Mr. Barrington. A lover’s imperfections are graces in love’s eyes.”

“You sentimental little goose!”

I did not mind being called names so long as Mrs. Bethell was diverted from the main subject. She talked copiously of her lost daughter, and I was saved from the hazard of making Felicia's confession indirectly. It would come far the best from herself—she had so pretty a way of saying serious things. My luck was to hear her say this:—when her cousins released her from croquet and went away, she joined her grandmamma and myself under the walnut-tree on the lawn, where we had a fine sheltered seat.

“Grannie, let us have tea out here,” she proposed.

“Wherever you please, my treasure.” I do not think her grannie ever now addressed Felicia without some tender word of endearment. She sat down on the grass at the old lady's feet, and leant against her knees, with one arm lying over them, looking up with a sweet emotion in her lovely eyes as she told her tale.

“Am I your treasure? Then bless me, grannie; for I too have found a treasure and I want it consecrated.”

“What is the child talking of? what has she found?”

“What is it that is stronger than death? that many waters cannot quench? That is past buying, though one would give all the world for it?”

“I was never quick at riddles, sweetheart,” rejoined the old lady with palpable evasion.

“Riddles, grannie! that's scripture. But guess,” pleaded Felicia coyly, and then she kissed the soft,

wrinkled hand that she had taken in her rosy palms to caress.

"I was never good at guessing, my darling. If it will not bear plain speech, perhaps it is not worth hearing."

"Ah, grannie, but you *do* guess. Now I *know* you guess!"

"If I guess right, even your silver tongue will not make it pleasant intelligence."

"Why not, oh, grannie, tell me why not?" Felicia's voice trembled; so did the old lady's lip. She considered that she was performing a duty: and being painful, it was a severe tax upon her kind, light temperament.

"Because it is hard to deny you—and yet in this you must be denied. My beautiful pearl must look higher for a mate than Captain Gresham; she is a prize for his betters."

"*I!* I am *nothing* unless he love me; grannie, I shall never, never love any one else."

"Never is a long day, jewel! I remember having some such delusion at nineteen; but it passed, and I married your grandfather, and have lived to a good old age." The sprightly dowager spread her hands abroad with the gayest gesture of self-mockery. Felicia gazed at her, moved yet curious: she had evidently heard something of this old story, and was willing to hear more.

"*Your* first love—he was a soldier too?" she said interrogatively.

"Yes, child, he was a soldier, handsome as any

in the British army. But his sword was his fortune, and your grandfather had houses and lands——”

“So he *bought you*—oh! grannie, I don’t like to believe it! And the *other*?”

“My *beau sabreur*? He left his bones in the Peninsula, my dear, with the rout of Sir John Moore’s army:—Life is made up of many events. We don’t exhaust the power of it over a single incident. Count up how many dear ones I have lost since:—My parents were both living when the list of dead at Corunna came home. To please them, I married your grandfather, who had courted me in vain for three years——”

“After your true love was dead and gone—not till then? I am glad of that!” interrupted Felicia.

“Not till my hero was dead—he is always my hero. Ah! there were men in those days. But you see, dearie, one cannot weep always. I was young, and nature is strong.”

“Yes, grannie, you were quite right; you are much nicer than a cheerless vestal. I too will turn my mind to marrying somebody else when the grass is green upon Prince Charming’s grave,” whispered Felicia, relapsing into drollery and mischief, now she thought her task over, and her cause won.

“You very heartless thing!” cried the old lady. “Be sure I did not dream consolation possible beforehand. Oh, I had a sad maiden widowhood, I promise you, and almost cried myself blind the first three months.”

“And that sorrow made you indulgent to mamma, whose choice, I have been told, was not thought

over wise; and it will make you indulgent to me, your poor treasure, will it not? For my Prince is hale and well, God be praised!" Felicia stopped, laughed, blushed—"And here he comes! Be *good* to him, grannie, if you love me!"

It was like a little scene in a play. Captain Gresham had called at the house, and had been sent by the servants to seek their mistress upon the lawn; and from the remotest point of it he advanced towards us, full in view all the way. I thought I had never seen a handsomer person. Mrs. Bethell thought the same.

"A very proper gentleman to the eye, but my precious Felicia must not set her heart upon him," said she in the gentlest matter-of-fact key while he was yet beyond hearing. And then she received him as graciously as if her next words would be words of welcome and congratulation.

Captain Gresham was always self-possessed, but he did not look so vastly at his ease as usual. He must have noticed Felicia's disconcerted air, though she rallied soon, and he probably felt that he was being talked about, and perhaps adversely, when he came upon the scene. The dowager and he, nevertheless, exchanged their compliments, inquiries, and small social chat without any diffidence, and the dowager bade him *go*, when Felicia, to beguile him to herself, invited him to see her grandmamma's orangery. As they moved off, I admonished her not to delay me long: a warning she acknowledged with a sprightly nod, and quite forgot.

Mrs. Bethell now had me at her mercy again.

“Dear Mrs. Gower,” she began deprecatingly, “you *must not* support that perverse child. You see how easy I am with her—I lay her under no restrictions. It is good and happy for a girl to amuse herself; but when it comes to settling for life, there are other things to be considered besides amusement. Look at it reasonably. Beautiful and accomplished as Felicia is, and with her family and fortune, she is *anybody’s* equal, might marry *anybody*.” I cordially assented—meaning that to so many blessings she might add yet another, and marry to please herself: but that was not what the dowager meant. She went on. “Then why should she not make a *great* marriage?—you would say that a happy marriage was better—but may not a great marriage be also a happy marriage? Listen: I will confide in you—I have *hopes*” (the simple manœuvrer glanced round as if in dread of an ambush before she gave her hopes tongue), “*hopes* that an alliance may be brought about between Stoneleigh and the *Castle*.” I stared aghast. “You are surprised—yet I assure you that Lady Augusta has thrown out hints—it is *quite* possible—even *probable*. The Marquis intends to range himself——”

“The Marquis? I should call him worse than nobody!” cried I.

“My dear little woman! *do* mind what you say,” urged the old lady, laying her right hand impressively on mine, and as shocked as if I had spoken blasphemy. But I persisted.

“*Much* worse than nobody! A man without figure, character, or sense; an ugly little man, and

as bad as bad can be! Now I do think D'Israeli the Elder is right when he stigmatizes the small gentry as the most servile class of the people. You would sacrifice Felicia to that contemptible, worthless person, only because he is in the peerage!"

"If I did not know you to be prejudiced, I should tell you that you are very rude,—I *will* tell you that you are uncharitable. Is a young man never to mend his ways, if he be in the peerage? Lady Augusta speaks in the highest terms of her brother's excellent disposition; and Felicia need know nothing of his past courses."

"If there were not another suitor for her in all England, Felicia would never marry the Marquis!"

"We shall see. You must not be so positive what Felicia will or will not do. With our consent she will never marry Captain Gresham; and disappointed of her first love, she is the sort of girl not to care very much whom she marries. Then rank and a title will weigh with her."

"And you would knowingly reduce her to that state of mind?"

"It was my own when I married; and I have met few women happier on the whole than myself."

"To my poor judgment it seems a deliberate and cruel wrong."

"You use such harsh terms, dear Mrs. Gower! You are quite infatuated about Captain Gresham! Except that he is a good-looking, tall, straight, manly fellow, very gay and pleasant, and with a reputation for high courage, which thousands share, what peculiar magic has he?"

“The peculiar magic which has charmed Felicia’s heart out of her bosom—and there is no use reasoning about it any longer.” And there was no time either; for the pair were now visible in the distance, returning to us leisurely. Mrs. Bethell rejoined that I was a more foolish, obstinate, opinionated little woman than she had ever suspected, but she would talk with me again, and bring me to my senses yet.

“You will not bring me to agree with you, if you talk till doomsday,” said I, resolutely; for the suggestion concerning the miserable, profligate young Marquis had made me ten times keener an advocate for Captain Gresham than before. How well he and Felicia looked, coming together up the lawn!

I was ready and anxious to be off on our road home now, but Felicia was still inclined to linger. It was hard to tear herself from Prince Charming’s company, because it was quite uncertain when they might meet again. She wanted also to exercise her pretty delusive arts on her grandmamma, to subdue her a little in his favour, and, if possible, to win an acknowledgment of success. But it was all in vain. The dowager was on her guard, though delightfully pleasant and indulgent in her manner. She was very gracious to Captain Gresham, but into her graciousness there entered a measure of condescension which was not encouraging to lovers’ hope. It was as if she had said: “You are two dear young fools; I love and admire you both; but you will not cheat me out of my better judgment.” Felicia understood her fully: Captain Gresham only partially, I think.

In fact, if Mrs. Bethell intended to persevere in her passive resistance and opposition to their expressed wishes, she ought to have shown him a much less kind and flattering countenance. To be just to her, I believe that she was incapable of realizing that any attachment could be so deep and serious as to influence the whole of a lifetime. Her own experience was against it, and yet she had, no doubt, ardently loved her *beau sabreur*, as she called him, in the days when she was young. She was now old, and felt herself wiser. She had had her sorrows and her joys, her desires and her disappointments, and so would Felicia have hers, and survive them. It was only those who did not know who talked of anything lasting for ever—or even lasting *long* in this world of changes, and compensations. Experience preaches lucidly—but it is never mature until after the age of the passions. It is *they* that are eloquent, persuasive; and against their eager, subtle arguments the judicial mind that has done with feeling, may plead and argue until patience is spent, and in the end, it will have accomplished nothing. Sufficient for youth is the wisdom thereof: Nature bears out the dictum in a thousand ways, ten thousand times a day.

When we left the Dower House it was late; and we were so tardy in reaching Stoneleigh that Arthur had sent twice to the Manor to ask if we were come. The reason was that Felicia bade the coachman drive very slowly that she might have time to relieve her mind of its new burden before we reached home.

“I am aggrieved, Cousin Clare: I had prepared

myself to see grannie as angry as she can be, but to see her not impressed at all is just provoking," said she, after a brief interval of silence. Captain Gresham had brought her to the carriage, and their parting—a final parting for some weeks—was expressive of a mutual trust and resolution. I was quite in their confidence, and there was no other witness. I agreed with her that the kind, courteous-mannered old lady had not taken a true measure of the occasion. She continued:—

"I know exactly how she has determined to act. She will treat this 'love-concern' of mine, as she calls it, on which the joy of my whole life depends, as a matter of the most trivial importance. The passive-resisting-power of people like grannie and papa is far worse to get over than a violent opposition. But I will not be ruled. Prince Charming and I have exchanged our vows, and I shall hold by mine to the death."

My sympathy with her was so profound and perfect that I replied unhesitatingly: "Keep in that mind, Felicia, and you will be happy, and not a soul the worse for it." She kissed me with grateful enthusiasm.

"You will be our advocate—Cousin Clare, I rely on you," said she, with fervour.

"You *may* rely on me. I pledged myself to your mother when she was dying to give you help and countenance in need, and if you need it in this affair I am on your side against all the opposition that self-interest and pride can array against you."

"If papa is contrary? Oh, there is a deal of pain and perplexity in the world!"

"Weakness is the most fruitful source of both; so be you strong, Felicia, and firm at once. Firm but conciliatory—steady but not aggressive. Record your pledge—let it be widely known, and stick to it. More formidable to your love than either your grannie or papa are their counsellors. I distrust Miss Reed emphatically. And your Uncle Tom will never be a friend to your marriage with anybody—that is my conviction."

"Poor Uncle Tom! I cannot believe him quite so bad as he is painted; and if he be, these are not the times for wicked uncles to make babes in the wood of nephews and nieces who keep them out of a fine inheritance. Yes, I have heard of Rosy's chatter: I have told her myself that it makes her ill-thought of to speculate on succession to my fortune, which can only happen through my death. It was only on my last birthday I assured her that with my own good-will I meant to marry and live happily ever afterwards, and to have as many children as it might please God to send me."

"You said that to Rosy? I commend your courage!"

"Yes; she was babbling in her fussy breathless fashion to the Claylands—'Ah, but you know, if Cousin Felicia were out of the way.' I hope it was half in jest, for she only laughed when I cried out upon her. I don't know who besides was cognisant of my declaration—but several persons were. I felt intensely angry, and did not pause to choose pretty,

modest words and phrases. Afterwards I took her to task between ourselves; for I am sure that I have been kind to Rosy and to all of them, and she cried—and then we were friends again. But you will allow, Cousin Clare, that it is exasperating to hear contingencies dilated upon that hang by one's being 'out of the way.' If I were invalidish, and threatening every day to die, I could excuse it—but full of life, and splendid health as I am—I cannot tell you how it rouses my indignation!"

"But I can imagine it. Happily we don't believe in the force of evil wishes."

"I don't suppose that Rosy *really* wishes me any mischief: but she is silly and thoughtless."

"And repeats incautiously other people's idle words."

"That is it. Rosy repeats all she hears, and so inaccurately often that when she begins a story I listen in terror—and she is very fond of telling little stories."

All that evening there was a load upon me. Everybody who knows what it is to have undertaken a pledge and a service that are likely to prove onerous will understand the sensation. While I was with Felicia, it seemed the most right, most generous, most reasonable thing to uphold her; but away from the exhilaration of her presence, came a revulsion, beset with the doubts and fears of responsibility. *If* I were doing unwisely? *If* I were helping her to wreck her life? *If* I were wrong to advise her against authority?—these were a few of the interrogatories

that my conscience put to me. And it was not instantly satisfied with any answer that I could give it. I was never a person to plead good intentions as a make-weight for foolish and faulty acts. I remember sitting by the window after dinner, watching the day darken, my work fallen on my lap, my heart full of disquietude: by no means happy, though certain that I meant to act for the best; and by no means positive I was right, though confident that pure love for Felicia was the sole motive actuating my conduct. People who are not liable to these fluctuations of thought after decision are very enviable. I had no idea of changing my line of policy, and yet I could not help feeling and seeing how capable it was of presenting to other persons a very different face from that which it presented to me—to Miss Reed, for instance. Nothing would convince a mind of her calibre that I had not some private interest to serve in encouraging Felicia to be constant and persevering in her love against the will of her family. Yet I certainly had none. We are apt to deceive ourselves, but I certainly had no object in what I said or did but the sweet girl's happiness, and if she — But, alas, what is the profit *now* of *ifs*?

CHAPTER XII.

The Course of true Love.

MR. BARRINGTON did not make as much haste in replying to his daughter's letter as the occasion deserved. She told me that Captain Gresham had written to him also, and that his answer was equally deferred.

"Can papa be ill?" she conjectured.

"Oh, no!" said I to cheer her. "Is he not always dilatory?"

"Yes," she replied; "but he might have written *now*. I often feel as if nobody really cared for me but Janet and Carr, George Sylvester and you. If I loved any one, I am sure I would not keep them in needless suspense. The end of it will be that I shall take my own way, and not care for other people any more than they care for me."

"Don't be naughty!" said I. "If other people are thoughtless, unkind or selfish, you will suffer none the less by opposing evil with evil."

She dropped her face upon her hands, and cried like a child. The hopeless sort of gesture, and the passion of tears took me by surprise. She had seemed more angry than hurt; but, after all, weeping is our way—our first and last resource in trouble!

A full week elapsed between the first day when Felicia had looked for a letter from her father and the day when it came. I saw Helen before I saw the poor girl herself, and Helen told me: "She has said nothing, but from her face I know that it is adverse."

It was one of the most provoking documents that ever man penned! If Felicia had consulted her father about the purchase of a spaniel or a canary, he could hardly have given her a lighter, more frivolous answer. It was clear to me that the dowager had sent Mr. Barrington her version of the affair, and had spoken of it as a mere caprice, whim, first-fancy, which would pass as easily as it had come, and for which a jesting, airy treatment was most judicious. If he had seen his daughter when she spoke of it to me he would have changed his mind.

"Captain Gresham will have a right to feel himself affronted if papa has taken this tone with him; for poor me, I must bear it," she said, tremulous with indignation. "Suppose I were to perpetrate some very rash and foolish act, I should only bear out my character. But I am safe with my Prince Charming! He is a great deal better than I am, much higher-minded, and nobler altogether."

"He is good in his way—but don't let us grow defiant on the first contradiction," whispered I, to divert a sort of tearful rage that threatened to overpower her self-control. She turned away to the window for a few minutes, and recovered her calm, but asserted that she was *very* unhappy.

“No, no,” urged I, “you are not very unhappy, because you have confidence that your lover loves you. These little perversities of relations are quite natural under the circumstances—obstacles to prevent the course of your true love running too smoothly. You are both in earnest; neither grannie nor papa can act long as if they believed you to be in play. Don’t be impatient, don’t be precipitate, and we shall see what we shall see.”

“Ah! Cousin Clare, you take refuge in oracular counsels! Acknowledge that I am unfairly used?”

I was quite ready to acknowledge it, for I thought so; but notwithstanding my partisanship, she left me in a discouraged humour.

A very active correspondence now ensued between the lady and her lover. Letters were written and received every day, and for a fortnight no further communication was made to me. But I was not uneasy. I was absolutely of opinion at this time that if Felicia proved steady and resolute she would prevail over opposition, and achieve not only what was best for herself, but also reconcile her real friends in her own family to think so. At the end of the fortnight, she quietly apprised me that Captain Gresham and herself continued of one mind to maintain their engagement, but that lawful authority would not be openly defied. They would meet when circumstances favoured, and they would correspond whether or no—meaning that leave would be assumed and not asked; and the end they would entrust to time, and the hour when Felicia would be of age to exercise her personal rights indepen-

dently. She said, and justly, I think, that her father would not stand out permanently against her will, nor her grannie either; and as for any one else, their interference was impertinent, and as such she should treat it.

The worst of it all was that this ruffled state of affairs completely upset the even tenor of her life. To be in antagonism with anybody fretted her. She ought to have been so happy, and she had very vexatious moments in her days. "You cannot help me," she would say, "and perhaps I weary you with my constant harping on one string." I assured her no always. Then she would continue: "To think that papa is angry or indifferent takes all the sweet out of my life! I could make any sacrifice to please him but *this*. Other girls have borne the same and worse; but if I had to choose I would rather encounter a violent opposition than this placid contemptuous denial of my right to my own love. As if I were a pettish child crying for the moon out of the sky!" To whatever she said by way of complaint I listened, and preached patience, only patience, and yet more patience. But in my secret mind, I felt that she was hardly used.

And soon, of course, the neighbourhood became cognizant of the brooding dissension at Stoneleigh, and took sides, and manifested its interest in much talk. Opinions were as various as the persons who expressed them. Miss Colquhoun was the first whom I heard at large upon the matter, and from her also I heard on the same occasion that another rumour

affecting Felicia was becoming public property. We met at Claylands, on a morning call.

"Is it true that the beautiful Miss Barrington of Stoneleigh is going to marry Captain Gresham, poor little Mrs. Fred Willis's brother?" she asked with a certain supercilious air, implying that she considered it highly improbable. As the question was addressed to nobody in particular, I did not feel called upon to answer it; and Mrs. Claylands who knew how things stood, shrewd, helpful, motherly woman that she was, put it aside as premature. It might be true or it might not, she said; but such affairs were not for gossip, and they were both (Captain Gresham and Miss Barrington) very handsome, charming, delightful young people.

"It cannot be true, *I* say," rejoined Miss Colquhoun obstinately regardless of discouragement; "for *who* and *what* is Captain Gresham, that he should aspire to the best match in the county?"

Mrs. Claylands looked amazed. "Don't you know? I imagined everybody knew. But such is fame!" cried she glowing.

"I don't mean *that*," said Miss Colquhoun knitting her brows. "Of course, I know about him in the Crimea, and what he did there—but his family? I have heard on the best authority that his grandfather was *nobody*."

"It cannot be helped—a great many people's grandfathers were nobody. Gresham is a good name in the City of London; Gresham Brothers are India merchants.—Captain Gresham is proud of his family, I believe; and if he please Felicia Barrington,

I doubt much whether a better gentleman could be found for her in any rank. His father bought Fairfield, and died suddenly, leaving a quite young family, and his widow married again. The uncles in London are both bachelors and are reputed wealthy. Captain Gresham has not much fortune in possession, but I should imagine that he has very considerable expectations."

"He does not boast of them then. I was told that he had relations engaged in business, but I hardly credited it. Perhaps *you* think Felicia Barrington lucky in her conquest? *I* certainly do *not*."

"She is said to think *herself* so, and to have made up her mind not to relinquish it; so *our* views are immaterial."

"I had heard another, and a very different story—one that I would much rather believe to be correct."

"Indeed! And what may that be?" Mrs. Claylands asked.

Miss Colquhoun lowered her voice to a chuckle, and looked inexpressibly sly and complacent as she gave us the benefit of her information. She fancied she was telling us news, but the air with which Mrs. Claylands listened showed that she, as well as myself, had heard it before.

"A little bird that builds in a Castle whispered me lately a tale of a *Marquis* and a certain fair lady."

It is always foolish to lose one's temper, but Miss Colquhoun's face, as she hinted the tale of the little bird, vexed me so suddenly that I exclaimed,

"And you would like that tale to be correct? For thorough-paced, wicked worldliness commend me to you ultra pious people! It is a shame to mention Felicia Barrington's name in the same breath as the Marquis of Leigh's."

Miss Colquhoun blazed up too. "Permit me to remind you, Mrs. Gower, that the Bible forbids to speak evil of dignities."

"Do you call such men as the Marquis *dignities*?"

"*Most* assuredly I *do*. The Duke and the Marquis are very *high* dignities. And further let me recall to you what St. Paul says, 'The woman which hath an husband that believeth not, and if he be pleased to dwell with her, let her not leave him. For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife.'"

"A perversion of Scripture, dear Miss Colquhoun," interposed Mrs. Claylands, coming to my rescue. "If Miss Barrington were actually the wife of a bad man, my advice, and Mrs. Gower's too, would be to make the best of him; but being still free, all who love her must hope and trust that she will not draw such a miserable, scandalous partner for life as the poor Marquis."

"He is a nobleman, Mrs. Claylands."

"Who has cast off the tradition that *noblesse oblige*."

It was a source of profound annoyance to me that this odious suggestion, connecting Felicia's name with that of the Marquis of Leigh, should have oozed out. It was circulating widely too. Helen

mentioned it to me a few days after my rencounter with Miss Colquhoun; she had heard it from Mrs. Willis, at Bylands, who was naturally disquieted by it on her brother's account.

"She need not be so," said I. "Captain Gresham has more hold over Felicia than Mrs. Willis imagines, if she be jealous for him." Helen did not demur to my opinion, but she remarked that it was a thousand pities such a notion should have gone abroad. "Everybody who knows Felicia must be quite sure that it is a mere fable," urged I, scorning it with all my might.

"You credit everybody with your own enthusiastic faith in her perfections, dear Clare. Many persons know Felicia who are by no means so sure as you would have them," rejoined my sister.

We talked the matter over for some time, I wondering with whom the scheme had originated, and who had first given it publicity. Helen thought it had originated with Lady Augusta Leigh, and as I knew she had spoken of it to Felicia's grand-mamma, it was not improbable that she had discussed it with other interested persons. She was notoriously anxious that her brother should marry, and perhaps she was making it her duty to discover a lady sufficiently lovely to lure him into captivity, and sufficiently rich for that substantial charm to outweigh any nominal disparity in rank. It was a mark of her *taste* that she should have fixed on Felicia Barrington for the purpose, but it did not lead me to form a very exalted opinion of her judgment—supposing her to have any real knowledge of

Felicia's character. But some of these very great ladies are afflicted with an infirmity similar to the national conceit of the Chinese, who consider all nations except themselves outer barbarians. It was intolerable that Lady Augusta should plot to entrap an innocent girl as wife for her brother, who, if he had not been in the peerage, would long ago have been in the penal colonies. His name of a Marquis, to be changed in the fulness of time for that of a Duke, was balance more than enough in her eyes for all the beauties, graces, and virtues of youth in a commoner. Oh! how angry I felt when I reflected on her presumption—and how foolish some of my *best* acquaintances would have thought my anger had they seen it.

Felicia knew nothing yet of the conspiracy against her peace. There is no more curious phenomenon in our social life than the way in which a man or woman can go about for weeks, months, years even, in blissful ignorance of the stories told of them, the sentiments ascribed to them, and the plans laid at their expense. And a very happy contrivance of Nature we ought to count it! I would never pray for the gift to see myself as others see me—a discerning Providence has wisely withheld it from us as more than our weakness could bear. We may be sure, from the witness of our own thoughts, that it would not increase our complacent satisfaction in ourselves, and it would as certainly not promote our love for our neighbours. Felicia had hosts of friends, and some true ones; and yet amongst the most trusted were a few who believed and *hoped* her

capable of treachery and a meanness, which, in the abstract, they would have called shameful—which *was* shameful, and, by her, absolutely inconceivable until it was suggested. And chief and foremost of those who would have misled her were her father and her grandmamma Bethell. If ever a woman had reason to pray to be saved from her *friends*, Felicia Barrington had!

CHAPTER XIII.

From a Castle.

I COME now to an episode in Felicia's story of first importance. The several points and scenes of it are still very clear in my remembrance.

My little Jack was big and discreet enough now to go on an errand to the Manor, and to bring back a message. He was free of the gardens, and Felicia was often pleased to have his lively, artless prattle for company in her walks about the village. One certain October afternoon he had been with her to visit young Widow Burt, and when he came home to the nursery-tea, he was quite full of it.

"Mamma, you never sing to the poor sick people; Cousin Felicy sings to them. Why don't you sing?" was his beginning. I said I could not sing so sweetly as she did, nor at all without music. He raised his dear bright eyes to mine. "It is out of her heart that Cousin Felicy sings, mamma; she said to me that it was out of her heart, and because she loves Baby Burt's mother, and God who is going to take her away. Why is God going to take her away? She does not want to leave baby—she will be very sorry."

"Not when she reaches Heaven where God is."

"No, I suppose not, because then she will hear the angels sing. Will Cousin Felicity be an angel when she goes to Heaven, mamma?"

Nurse interposed: "She's an angel on earth, Master Jack, and we can't spare her to Heaven yet. And now you eat your bread-and-milk, and don't slop your pinnie." Nurse was a thorough good servant of the old-fashioned sort, who kept Jack in order, and abridged his "metaphysics," as she called his difficult questions, by recommending the practice of present duties. I was going away downstairs with a smile on my face when my little lad's voice recalled me.

"Mamma, mamma, stop! I forgot—Cousin Felicity wants you. I was to tell you that she is going away to the Castle to-morrow, and she wants to see you first. She had not time to come to you, so would you go to her?"

"Jack should remember always to tell mamma his message at once," said I, admonishing him with a view to future occasions; "or else mamma will not be able to trust Jack as her little messenger."

There was still an hour before we dined, and speculating why it was that I had heard nothing yet of this visit to the Castle, I went across to the Manor, and found Felicia in the midst of a dress-parade under the hands of Janet and Carr, with Helen presiding. She explained her movements.

"Papa is in London to-day, and to-morrow he is to be at Lowndes Castle. Lady Augusta sent a man on horseback over this afternoon while I was in the village to invite me to go too. I am very

glad; for papa was to stay there three days before coming home; and now I shall see him so much the earlier. Dear papa! Was it not kind of Lady Augusta to think of me?"

My acquiescence was not so hearty as, under other circumstances, it might have been, but Felicia was too much absorbed in her preparations to notice that. She had a genuine pleasure in being beautiful to please her papa, and these preparations for a three days' visit were on an extensive scale. At the moment of my arrival she was in full dress, as I had never seen her before. It was a promise that she would put on her court train some day for me to admire; but, as yet, it was a promise deferred. She was splendid and lovely enough to adorn any palace in the kingdom as I saw her now: all in white cloudy softness upon shimmering satin, and her hair folded in a large loose knot without any ornament. This was her latest adopted fashion—classical, she called it; and a more charming face, or a neck more graceful, nature nor art ever moulded. "A sweet woman," that was the word for her, a gracious fair woman; for there was no awe in her beauty; kisses, caresses, kindness seemed all her due.

There were several toilettes to be passed under review, but after one more Felicia suggested that there would be time in the morning, and so she dismissed her maid. Helen also went out in a few minutes, and then we were left to ourselves. She did not lose a moment of our precious *tête-à-tête*.

"Cousin Clare, will you do me a favour? Look over my letters to-morrow morning and the next

day, and send a groom to the Castle with any you think I might be anxious for."

Oh! the cunning of her! of course it was Prince Charming's letters she wanted, without waiting a post later. And a groom must ride eight miles with them. I promised to send all.

"Papa will be sure to ask why the man comes, and I shall tell him. I mean to let papa know out of my own mouth and at once, that my mind is fixed. If he imagines that I can be persuaded to give way, there will be no peace for either of us. But I am in hopes that when he sees my resolution, he will be kind and consent. For he loves me, and all my happiness depends upon retaining his love, and not losing that other which they would make so light of."

"Be open and persevere," was my counsel still. "You will have need of all your courage."

"Yes. Sometimes I pause in my happy thoughts, and remember that I am really in a great straight. It is a sad and dreadful thing to defy papa—but then I ask myself why he should require me to give up what I hold as my chief earthly blessing—the love of a true good man. Some women are fickle of feeling enough, but it would go hard with me, I know it would, if my heart were violently wrenched from what it loves."

"I believe that, Felicia; you would suffer even more than you fear. If for any of the poor reasons alleged against Captain Gresham, you are prevailed on to break your pledge, you will come to despise

yourself. And mortified pride adds a poignant sting to the wounds of affection."

"Cousin Clare, I am strong; I shall never be moved!" she said, and the rosy colour mounted into her face. "If they persecute me and are angry, or if they think scorn of him, I will ask them which of my kinsmen by blood is his equal—is so honourable, brave and beautiful as my Prince Charming? Think of poor Uncle Tom *daring* to sneer at Captain Gresham, and to hint that he is not so high-minded as he seems—to hint that it is my *fortune* has won him! As if I were not woman enough to be loved for myself! I told him that his insinuations were an insult to me, and forbade him to come into my presence again until he had made amends. And then he must needs say that he spoke only to prepare me; and what I refused to hear in my ear all the world would soon be proclaiming on the house-top. Let all the world proclaim, and what care I!"

"The less you care the better. It is your duty to let the world know that you are not of its way of thinking. It is your duty to stand fast by your plighted word, for his sake as much as for your own. It would be a cruel wrong to throw him over after what has passed. Some may try to convince you that your word is not binding, if your papa refuse to ratify it—but I tell you it is peculiarly binding."

"I know it, Cousin Clare." She paused a moment, and there was a humid shyness in her eyes as she went on, in a low voice. "I think I fell in love with him first: he was for ever in my thoughts

before he had looked or said a word of love to me—and so I drew him. Do you think he would have gone away heart-whole if I had let him?”

“No. I don’t think he would have gone away heart-whole, but there would have been no poison to rankle in his wound. I believe he would have left you as one above his ambition, whom he could have dearly loved had fortune been more propitious. There is no shame to you that you loved him first—it was a light attraction; a mere scorching, not skin-deep, which would have worn off by now, if he had not let your witchcraft prevail over his conventional scruple. I am glad that he did. But so much the more do you owe him fidelity, loyalty, and a steadfast face against those who would degrade him in your esteem.”

“That they will never do, *never!* He loves me *now*, Cousin Clare?”

“Ardently as woman can desire!—and that is another peril. If you could let him be cut off from you, you would do him a mischief past healing. He would lose all faith in us. But you are going to be true to him; to live and die for him; to be, please heaven, his happy, happy wife!”

She had drooped her face so that I could not see it. What I did see was a great tear splashing on her claspt hands. Why should she weep? I cannot tell. Tears were near her eyes, and fuller in her heart, perhaps, than I knew. Musing over our conversation afterwards I could not but feel that in her very expressions of self-confidence there was a vein of self-distrust—a half-conscious fear of her

own weakness. The impression left on my mind was one of pain, doubt and anxiety for her.

Besides her papa Felicia did not know who she should meet at the Castle, but there was always a rapid succession of visitors in the shooting-season; and it was reckoned a prodigious honour in the county to be on the list of its annual guests. The Duke was, in fact, our "great man." And he had excellent qualities besides his "greatness." He promoted public works and improvements for the public good, and was a liberal and active administrator of his large territory. His Duchess was some years dead, and his eldest daughter, the Lady Augusta, the only one left unmarried, did the honours of his house. The Marquis came very little into the country, but he was at the Castle during Felicia's visit, and the rarity of his appearances made the event the more noted. It was told to me the morning she left the Manor.

She rode over to Lowndes, and I saw her set off: her natural gaiety all in full bloom, and thoroughly purposed to enjoy herself. Transient clouds and showers notwithstanding, there was a well-spring of hope and joy in her heart. "Good-bye! be happy, come back safe!" was all I had time to cry to her from the open drawing-room window as she pulled up in the road and looked over the hedge. She nodded and smiled, and then turned and trotted down the hill, I listening till the sound of the horse's hoofs died away in the distance.

It was a most exquisite morning, and she must

have had a delicious ride. Lords and squires and farmers had not then in Gladeshire got the length of enclosing the grassy margins of the roads, nor of paring the hedges to the quick. We had still pretty bits of wayside scenery; knolls and slopes, and expanses of turf where stood groups of fine trees, and white-thorn bushes, and patches of hazel; where the windfalls of sticks were nobody's property, and the poor had them, and where the windfalls of beech-mast and acorns were the undisputed perquisite of village pigs. We have begun to change all that now, and the change is not for the better.

"It is robbing the poor, and I will never allow it while I live," was a speech of dear Felicia's to her steward when he represented to her the gain it would bring to the estate in a few years if the irregular open spaces that used to lie along the left-hand side of the road under the Beecham copses were fenced in and planted. Nearly all our cottagers kept a cow then, and to these sweet green patches the children used to lead them, and play, or gather sticks, quest for nuts, or string daisies while they grazed. What would become of the cows if these common pastures were enclosed, Felicia wanted to know. The steward said that, of course, they would cease to be kept by some persons; and he instanced old Mrs. Burt as one who would have to give up her cow. Then it was that Felicia called these acquisitions in favour of herself "robbing the poor," and I am sure she was just in what she said—morally and politically just. "You would put," said she, "a little more money into my purse of which I

should never feel the weight, because it is heavier than my needs already, and you would take away the rights of my poor cottagers, making them poor indeed. You laugh at their *rights*—if they were as strong as we are they would maintain them: they recognize them well enough, but they do not know how to go about protecting them, and rich men who think they can never have enough, rob them without fear of law or equity. If Widow Burt could not feed her little cow as she does, she would sink into meagre poverty—now she feels well-to-do, as I would like all my poor tenants to do. It is a cruel farce to steal from them every means they have of helping themselves, and then to preach to them the sweetness of labour and independence, and the duty of submission to God and the Squire. I shall not remove the old landmarks of Stoneleigh to seize the inheritance of the poor—never propose it to me again!”

I remember these sentiments of Felicia's while I write, because just now the people have been again deprived of a privilege which she restored to them at this period, when their rights in the soil were brought before her. There is a vast meadow, the Ings we call it, in a bend of the river which from time immemorial was common to the villagers on the payment of a shilling a head to the Lord of the Manor for the cattle they turned out upon it. When Mr. Barrington's extravagance began to pinch him (while Felicia was yet a child) he had taken away this privilege, and let the meadow to a grazier at a higher profit. Felicia, being put upon the clue by

her steward's proposal to fence-in the purlieus of the Beecham copses, made inquiry, and gave the water-meadows back to the small tenants on the old terms. Mr. Tom Bethell, since his accession to the property, has again resumed the privilege, and has seized moreover every shred and margin of waste land where cow or donkey or geese could get a bite.

Arthur says that the thrifty cottagers' market-baskets, which used to go to Gladestone twice a week full of butter, eggs, and poultry, will fall off. It must be so. When the labourer's wife has nothing but her husband's wages, it is very hard to live; but with her garden-stuff, a little crop of fruit to sell in the autumn, the chickens which picked up a living almost for nothing, and the little cow which fed on the common, she was able to clothe and nourish her children well. I fear we shall see poverty such as there is in places where "improvement" has been long at work. I am not a political economist, but I have the use of my reason. The *power* that large owners of land possess over the bodies and souls of men is immense. Some of them feel and act as if it were *absolute*: now as to land, "the land is the Lord's," and an onerous *trust* in whatever hands it be—not *property* like the gains of trade. Men and women must dwell upon it, whether the nominal owner will or no; and if he strain his *power*, calling it his *right*, he is guilty of malversation in his *trust*. What things are done in our day! I have heard of a hungry poor man prosecuted and sent to prison and hard labour for plucking a turnip in a field, and eating it! Enough, I say, to bring a curse upon

the land! Surely masters and magistrates, who measure such *justice* to the poor, have forgotten their Bible and its ancient laws, which say that a passer through a vineyard shall eat his fill of grapes, and through a corn-field shall pluck the ears with his hand, and forbid that any man shall make a clean riddance in the day of the harvest—on peril of forfeiting the blessing of the Lord of the harvest. We talk a vast deal about philanthropy, but we are fallen far behind the old customs in brotherly kindness!

It is reflecting on these things, and the changes that are being made in and round the village that carries me back to Felicia, and her principles of action while she was sovereign at Stoneleigh. The spirited graceful figure riding about the fields, the roads, the woods, dear and familiar to all the country, passes before me again.—She knew everybody, from the last-born baby in the village to the oldest bed-ridden and infirm folk; she had a right royal memory for names, ages, and circumstances once confided to her, and the tenderest heart and most generous hand to pity and heal the troubles not beyond human healing. I can truly say of my darling, paraphrasing the words of Holy Job, that “when the ear heard her, then it blessed her; and when the eye saw her, it gave witness to her: because she delivered the poor that cried, and the fatherless, and him that had none to help him; the blessing of him that was ready to perish came upon her; she was as one that comforteth the mourners.”

But let me remember that it is a history, not a panegyric, that I have undertaken to write.

My first despatch to Felicia at the Castle did not contain a letter from Prince Charming; the second did. On the third morning, when we were expecting her back at the Manor that day, I received a letter by post to tell me that her visit was to be prolonged over Sunday, and to bid me continue to send the groom as before with her letters. Thus she wrote for gossip, after she had issued her commands.—

“This is a delightful house to stay in; there is so much to see, and so much going on. Old Crotchets is here, and you know what excellent friends we are, and Mr. Falkner and his sister. Lady Augusta says Mr. Falkner is a great favourite at the Castle, and the Duke seeks his advice in whatever he does at Lowndes. I never see him but at breakfast and dinner, and we have not exchanged six words; but his sister delights me. She is so quaint and odd, not vulgar at all, but frankly ignorant of the ways of our society. Do you recollect her asking poor Uncle Tom which would fetch the better price, he or her brother, if both were to sell? She continually comes out with speeches as discountenancing as that was to him, and I cannot discover whether it is with the shrewdness of malice prepense, or only a trick of plain speaking such as fine society has given up. The effect is irresistible sometimes, and I can well imagine that some people may be what Lady Augusta says *she* is—afraid of her. She does not set up for a wit or for clever at all, but she has travelled so much with her brother, and lived amongst men of

his sort until she has acquired their tone of mind, and a fund of most amusing talk. I shall invite her to the Manor; for papa has quite taken to her.

“Mr. Cartwright leaves to-day, and the Falkners to-morrow, and then come the two married daughters, with their spouses. I don’t know either of them, but Lady Augusta promises that I shall like them both. *She* is goodness itself to me; I think her a most amiable woman, though she has overweening notions of her nobility. I could fancy, now and then, that Miss Falkner was making fun of her airs of condescension. I like to watch them together; they look as if they would enjoy a good quarrel, a bout of high words. Shall you call me a naughty tattler if I tell you what old Crotchets whispered to me as the cause of it? ‘She would marry him to-morrow, if he’d ask her—but he won’t!’ *She* meaning Lady Augusta, *he* Mr. Falkner. And this is why little Miss Falkner sticks up her pretty back when the fine lady tries to stroke her down—she despises such pretensions to her brother. In the midst of the comedy the Duke and Mr. Falkner move about beautifully unconscious—but imagine the state of the world if such a *mésalliance* were possible!

“This is written between the lights, after a ride about the park with papa by himself. You may guess what my thoughts were when we started; but papa put off any discussion of you know what—saying, that it would keep until we got home. I was not sorry to defer it—one likes to defer a bad moment; but I shall never have a mind quite at ease until it is settled.—See how my pen runs! I took

a little sheet on purpose to write little, and I have barely left space enough to say that I am ever your loving Felicia. (Written across.)

“That was a sweet letter you sent me yesterday.”

As Felicia was not to be expected that afternoon Helen went out for a drive with me in the pony carriage, and we took the road to Horsley Moor. It was a brilliant day, and the early autumnal landscape as lovely as at any season of the year. The moor was in the Duke's territory, and across one corner of it was to cut the new railway. Already the sods were turned, and a gang of navvies at work; and riding along the line was Mr. Falkner, mounted on a serviceable stout cob, no beauty, but good for use. He was in working trim, dusty, heated, busy, and with him was another equally energetic man, setting on the labourers, whom I knew later as the contractor for the line. Mr. Falkner was the engineer-in-chief, and we heard that certain difficulties in its construction which had hitherto delayed it, had been admirably got over by his skill and genius. He was, indeed, a man of very great ability, and most highly considered amongst practical, progressive people; but in his suit of brown tweed powdered with chalk, his drab wideawake, and snuff-coloured leather leggings, he did not look quite the man one would suspect of aspiring to match with a duke's daughter. He looked a man of too much sense.

We had left Mr. Falkner ten minutes behind and were zigzagging up a steep rise of the moorland

road, when suddenly, over the top of it, and a little to the left on the turf, appeared a gay cavalcade. Lady Augusta and Mr. Barrington, Miss Falkner, Felicia and the Marquis. Hats flew off, and we crossed at a quick pace, but the next minute Felicia wheeled her horse round, and rode after us. We pulled up, and she was very glad to see us, though we had parted so lately. It did not appear, however, that she had very much to say, and there, within earshot, was the Marquis. It pleased me to have the opportunity of seeing him again, for I had not seen him since he was a fat, uncouth, shy boy. He was now a pulpy red-visaged man, reserved, solemn, pompous as a figure on a monument. Miss Colquhoun, who had a proper reverence for rank, professed to see in him a truly ducal grandeur; but I could discern only a fatuous self-conceit, bolstered up with traditional notions of honour, when all real honour was gone. His utterance was thick, and further confused by a lisping drawl; and as his character was bad, on Miss Falkner's queer principle of selling a man for what he was worth, the Marquis of Leigh, put up to auction, would probably have turned out worth less than nothing. And this was the wretched being Lady Augusta and others *dared* to think might condescend for a wife to sweet Felicia Barrington.

While we were still halting, Mr. Falkner trotted up and joined the party; and in pairing off again to continue their road, Lady Augusta paired with him, Mr. Barrington with Miss Falkner, and Felicia was again left to the Marquis. Helen and I naturally fell

a-talking of them when they were gone. The Marquis was, my sister admitted, one of the ugliest of men, but she was quite sure that the majority of people were unable to see it—honestly incapable of seeing it; because of the glamour the mere name of a Marquis sheds before average eyes. She then mentioned Lady Augusta, and I confided to her Felicia's bit of naughty tattle; to which she calmly replied: "I have no doubt that Old Crotchets is right; I should not be surprised to hear of Lady Augusta accepting anybody who could give her a good establishment. When the Duke dies the Castle will be no home for her. But I should be surprised if a shrewd man like Mr. Falkner invited her to share his—Stanilands is grand enough for her, but——"

"You think it would be too much presumption in him to ask her. I don't suppose he will,—but, remember, a daughter of the Earl of Northmere has married an artist, and a very bad artist."

"True—I wonder how the R.A.'s dare defy public opinion to the extent of hanging his pictures—vulgar enough for village signboards they are, though all royal and noble portraits. Perhaps it is a charity to employ him—people are practically very kind in this world."

Speaking of Stanilands made me propose to include it in our afternoon drive, and I turned Judy's head in that direction. It was rather beyond Judy's range, but she could do it on a time by chance, and I had not seen the place since Mr. Falkner's

new house was finished. Stanilands was old church lands, and bore the ruins of a beautiful priory, once the richest religious house in that division of Gladeshire. It was but a ruin, however, and dangerously neglected, and the parish-church was not much better when Mr. Falkner obtained possession of them. The farms and dependencies which had formerly constituted the estate of Stanilands, had passed piecemeal from the old proprietors into various hands, until only the mansion-house, which blocked the view of the Priory from the high-road, the garden, and one large field, lying in a bend of the river, remained. The precious fragment had been sold to Mr. Falkner two or three years before we knew him in Gladeshire, and, though the last Squire Stanilands died in the house, it was understood that he only ended his days there by the leave and forbearance of the new owner. But within a week of his retirement to the family-vault under the chancel of the church, his old house was level with the ground, and from that day to the present, I had never seen the place at all. But all the countryside had heard of the handsome residence that had risen on a new site there, revealing the Priory to public view, and making the utmost of the natural charms of the situation. During the summer Mr. Falkner had taken up his abode there with his sister, and the society of the neighbourhood had graciously made them welcome. We had not called, because, as I said before, Stanilands was rather too far off, and the first and only time I had seen them until to-day was on the occasion of the Peace Celebration at Stoneleigh;

but everywhere they were well spoken of, and as an acquisition.

I had prepared myself to see a fine house, but nothing architecturally exquisite as the fabric that Mr. Falkner had reared on that forsaken, neglected spot. The house was not large, but it was perfect in its proportions, and built with a taste and a cost of labour that now-a-days we rarely see. The stone of the country and old stones that had cumbered the ground about the ruins for generations, had been employed for the walls, and the roof was of old tiles, mossed and weather-stained, giving it already that ripe colouring of age which no other beauty can compensate for the want of. Some persons had talked of sacrilege, and of using the ancient Priory for a quarry, when they heard of the builders laying stones new and old together; but Mr. Falkner did as he liked, and let them say. When he had cleared the ruins of the heaps of fallen materials, to the joy of ecclesiologists, he proceeded to excavate and lay bare the old foundations, and did all that art and science could to preserve the remnant that was left standing. And beyond and about it, to the verge of the cliffs by the river, he laid out his gardens and pleasure-grounds, and out of a desolate wilderness created an earthly paradise. The church was now undergoing restoration at his sole cost, and a new school was already built and occupied. A few very conservative folk thought it all a great pity, and made often allusions to the "old family," as if they had been a pattern for squires, instead of a thriftless, selfish, corrupt race, around whom had

been produced a village full of ignorant, idle people who contributed more rogues and vagabonds to the Quarter-Sessions than any other three villages within the county. Mr. Falkner had been put in the commission of the peace, and was reforming his district with a high hand. Thanks to his benevolence, justice and severity, the young generation would have a good chance of growing up materially to improve the old stock.

We viewed the new beauties of Stanilands only so far as they were visible from the road, but what we saw was enough to give us a notion of what was unseen, and Helen remarked, laughing, as we turned to drive homewards: "Mr. Falkner is quite the best match in this division of the county—always excepting the Marquis."

"I should not even except the Marquis. And who else is there? only the eldest sons at Claylands and Bylands."

"And Mr. Barrington," added Helen quietly.

"Oh! surely he will never marry again. Remember Felicia——"

"It is improbable. But one can never be positive what a man will do."

"Nor a woman either—eh? They used to predict me that I should soon lose you by a second marriage; but I have you safe yet, you see."

There was no answer to this. I was struck, and peeping under Helen's bonnet, I perceived that she was smiling to herself in a roguish way that meant mischief. "Helen, you don't mean to say that you have been keeping anything from me?"

cried I, almost pulling Judy on her haunches in my sudden alarm.

"Don't upset us, Clary dear," said she with provoking coolness. "If we get safe home, perhaps I will tell you something—though I daresay you have half guessed it already."

"No, I have not the shadow of a guess. I am utterly amazed—taken utterly by surprise."

"But you are not angry, Clary?"

"Tell me who it is. You have been *very* reserved."

"I will not tell you until you look kinder."

"Is it Mr. Falkner?"

"Mr. Falkner? No! I prophesy that Mr. Falkner will marry that buxom, blooming cousin of his, who has been over to Stanilands twice to stay—a Scotch lassie with a lovely lowland accent, a complexion of milk and roses, and hair—well, curly golden hair with the red sun in it."

"Don't talk nonsense, Ellie, but tell me—who is it?"

"Old Crotchets."

"*I don't believe it.*"

But it *was* Old Crotchets, nevertheless—and this was what had come of Felicia and he being such excellent friends! How Felicia must have been taken in! It made me smile to think of it. When the gentleman was trotting his nag by her little carriage-ponies (a circumstance I had often heard of without giving it a further thought), and paying a sentimental court to her, he was really wooing my Helen. It must have been going on ever since she came to

the Manor. I recollected now many suspicious appearances. Well, they say, lucky's the wooing that's long a-doing, and this had been years a-doing—or is it the other way?—lucky's the wooing that's *not* long a-doing—Yet, Old Crotchets! What might his age be? Fifty? No, not so much as that—forty-seven, perhaps. He had been called Old Crotchets for twenty years; from the period when he succeeded to his patrimony, and impoverished himself for life, by paying off, with interest, the debts of his father and grandfather. This was said to be the reason why he had never married before; he was too poor to keep any establishment. He had a character for quixotically lofty principle, and a reputation for the most incisive bitter speech, combined with a habit of speaking aloud. He was feared in some quarters, but this fear amongst the mean, was balanced by a genuine respect amongst the higher-minded. The solitary, student life he led had developed a few eccentricities of manner, but he had a good keen face, a wiry, tall, alert figure, and a generous heart and moderate temper—together, when I had recovered from the shock that it *was* Old Crotchets, I easily disposed myself to believe that Helen, if she must marry again, could not well marry more discreetly. Perhaps the fact that she would still remain within my reach, helped to promote my resignation. But I said that her going would be a great pity for Felicia.

“Not if it obliges her father to stay more at Stoneleigh. It would be better for both of them if they were more together,” Helen replied. “Felicia

will hardly consent to another *chaperone*—to a successor in my room; and until she marries, there will be no choice left to Mr. Barrington but to take care of her himself.”

“I wish with all my heart that Captain Gresham may be able to make himself acceptable to her friends—then she might marry with brief delay,” said I.

Helen shook her head; she saw difficulties in the path that I could not see—or rather, which I would not recognize as any real difficulties at all. Talking of these, and of Helen’s own affair, brought us home to the Rectory, and the first thing we saw on entering my drawing-room was a letter on the table, laid to catch my eye. The groom who had gone over to the Castle in the morning with Felicia’s letters had brought this back. I instantly knew her writing:—What could she have had to write about—and so soon again? She had not mentioned it when we met on Horsley Moor—to be sure, with the Marquis close by she had not an opportunity, if it were a private matter. But she looked blithe enough, I said; there could be nothing wrong. Helen urged me to open the letter and see; she had not thought Felicia looking so blithe. It was an unconfessed dread that made me dally: but, at last, I broke the seal, unfolded the sheet within, and sat down to read it—Helen reading it at the same time over my shoulder. This was what my darling wrote:—

“DEAREST COUSIN CLARE,—

“I AM very unhappy, and very, *very* angry. Somebody has been writing to papa about you and me and Prince Charming—I don’t exactly know what, for the letter was not shown me (it arrived by this morning’s post), but papa says he warns me that *our* intimacy must cease, unless I promise to give up my ‘insane delusion’ because you encourage it! And he says further that dear Mrs. Gresham shall leave me, and he will give me another duenna. He announced these resolutions in that gusty annoyed way, which is his way of showing perplexity, and which would soon pass if he were left to the motions of his own kind temper; but you are my dear good friends, you and your sister, and shall not be insulted if I can hinder it, and I have told him that I shall let you know beforehand what he threatens. He insisted of my not confessing what he calls my ‘insane delusion’ to Lady Augusta, or Miss Falkner, or anybody here—as if I should be likely to blazon my sorrows to the world! but I said that not for anything would I *deny* my engagement to Captain Gresham, if I were challenged to say whether it were true. Oh! how impatient he was then! I see well that there is to be a great quarrel, and the thought of it breaks my heart, but I will *not* give in! Who can have written to papa to stir up his anger? He declined to tell me, and I shall not ask again. It was a wicked and a cruel thing to do. I shall not write what was said of Captain Gresham—it was too false and insolent to be repeated. It makes me wretched to be at variance

with dear papa! I wish now we were at home; for it is such a trouble to have to go about smiling and talking of nothing, when I should like to shut myself up, and have a good cry.—Continue to send me my letters. I sorely need the comfort of them! What would my own dear mamma have said if she could have lived to see her poor Felicity so persecuted?”

Helen laughed a little over the pathetic exaggeration of this letter, as it sounded to her then, with the recollection of Felicia's blooming, flowery face before her eyes as we had seen it since the letter was written.

We both said: “It will come right, it will come right, at last.” But for all that we sighed, and wished it were right without any long waiting for. As for the menaces directed against ourselves, they were naught.

CHAPTER XIV.

Mr. Tom Bethell delivers his Conscience.

MR. BARRINGTON and Felicia arrived at home on the Monday ensuing. That afternoon, before they came, I received a visit from Mr. Tom Bethell, who had not lately honoured me. He was looking anxious and eager, like a man with a vast stake pending, who exists from moment to moment in terror lest he should lose it. He had come over to Stoneleigh in the expectation of finding Mr. Barrington and Felicia already returned from the Castle, and not to have his ride from Ringwood for nothing, as he said, he dropped in at the Rectory to wait for them, and to see me and my worthy husband. He was in a restless fidgety temper, evidently with a burden of suppressed wrath in his thoughts, and one inevitable theme that he longed to discourse upon. We staved it off as long as we could, and learnt from him all the news of the country-side, but at last he succeeded in introducing a supercilious allusion to Felicia's love-concern, and I knew that it was useless any more to try to divert him from it. Arthur was tired of the case, and left us on the plea of somebody in the village to visit. Then Mr. Tom disposed himself for serious con-

versation. His preamble was enough to frighten me, but I took heart, and braced up my courage.

“Once for all, Mrs. Gower, I desire to deliver my conscience, and then we shall know on what platform we stand,” said he sententiously. “You consider yourself as peculiarly Felicia’s friend, as a friend of the family, and, indeed, as in some sort a connexion; but you must permit me to say that *we* do not feel you have shown yourself friendly towards any of us—and least of all towards Felicia, poor misguided child, who is likely to fall a sacrifice to mischievous counsels. For it is madness, sheer madness, to suppose that her infatuation for Captain Gresham will be allowed to conquer. You lead her to hope it may, but you will both find yourselves deceived. The man is a common fortune-hunter, neither more nor less than a *common fortune-hunter*—the most despicable of characters! and that a clever girl like Felicia should fall into his snares, is the most absolutely humiliating exposure of female perversity and weakness that I ever came across. I cannot understand it at all!”

I really do not think he could. He had wrought himself up into a malignant belief that Captain Gresham was utterly mean, selfish and insignificant; and his voice grew thick and tremulous with emotion as he went on to denounce in no measured terms, the ambitious suitor of his wealthy niece.

“Captain Gresham is not handsome; that sword-cut has spoilt a face that was probably never much to look at. His family has no pretensions to gentry—his grandfather was a tradesman in the City of

London; I know it for a fact! The Greshams are, indeed, well-known mercantile people; I believe one of them built the Exchange, and was Lord Mayor, or something quite as low, in Queen Anne's time. I daresay another was a peddling country-brewer, like that ruffian, Oliver Cromwell. A taint of snob-bishness always sticks to these monied men—not that Captain Gresham can boast of much means; besides his pay he has only the paltriest of allowances from his mother! How such a person *dared* manœuvre for an alliance with *us* is a marvel even in the present day, when all the ancient land-marks of society are being pushed aside. The democracy is climbing higher yearly, and the nobility and gentry are descending to meet them. Soon all will be chaos! The privilege of peerage will be lost, and it would not surprise me to see royalty condescending to match with a subject! But *we* will uphold what belongs to our honour, and the marriage you and your sister have practised to bring about between Felicia and Captain Gresham we will *never* tolerate! You admire it, you countenance it, but I give you my word that it shall *never* be!”

This and much more to the same purpose said Mr. Tom Bethell, too angry and too much heated to be well aware of what he did say. I would not quarrel with him, but I made a silent resolution never again, if I could help it, to see him except in Arthur's presence. Now there was nothing for it but to quit the room, or to hear his monologue out. I decided on hearing it out, afraid lest I should prejudice my right as Felicia's advocate in

future, if I retreated from her defence now. He continued in the same painful, strained, monotonous high voice:—

“It was *you*, Mrs. Gower, who first brought Captain Gresham and that unfortunate girl together. Oh! but you have much, *much* to answer for! If my poor faithful friend, Miss Reed, had taken the place into which you *thrust* your sister, this dreadful difficulty in the family would not have happened. I don’t know what will be the end of it, nor anybody else!”

“Confusion to their enemies, I pray!” cried I laughing; for his vaticinations were ludicrously in excess of any calamity it was possible to foresee yet. Felicia might have been smitten with a deadly plague to hear him—or Captain Gresham might have been a basilisk!

“Enemies? Felicia has no enemy but herself!” rejoined my visitor with rage more intense. “Miss Reed, that excellent soul, shed *tears* in speaking of the hapless child’s blindness. But her eyes must be opened, though the operation be ever so rending! She must be restrained from the company of those dangerous and interested persons who seek to advance themselves by humouring her headstrong folly. There never was such a history as this shall be, nor such a scandal unless she can be brought to hear reason!”

This threat I heard as the mouthy impotence of a man beside himself with fury. I was no longer at a loss to conjecture from whom had emanated the letter to which Felicia ascribed her papa’s ad-

monitions, and his menaces against Helen and myself. The ingenuous Miss Reed had launched that little venture in her patron's favour. I was not sorry to know it, but knowing it, I found it hard to hold my peace.—Mr. Tom Bethell proceeded:—

“It is all over the country that Miss Barrington is engaged to Captain Gresham. I have denied it, and shall deny it everywhere. And now, tell me, Mrs. Gower, are you with us or against us? Forewarned is forearmed, you know.”

“Against you,” said I coolly.

“That is enough. Now we shall know how to go on.”

I could not forbear a smile. “Did they propose to lock up the young lady?” I said. He glared. “Would it serve your purpose better to see your niece married to the Marquis of Leigh?” I inquired. If I had not been tolerably certain that he knew this rumour before I would not have mentioned it. He turned white with anger.

“If it were anybody but a lady who asks me that question I should know how to answer it,” he muttered. Then raising his voice. “I wonder that you, professing to love her, can bear to allude to such a slander! It is shameful. I do not know which would be the deeper infamy for our family—that Captain Gresham should marry Felicia for her money, or that Felicia should marry the Marquis of Leigh for his rank. Perhaps the last—for Gresham has a reputation for courage, and the Marquis is a scoundrel whose title alone saves him from being kicked out of society. I am amazed that Barrington,

who knows the world, should have let his daughter go to him at the Castle when the Marquis was there—it is even said he was there to meet *her*, and a colour of truth is given to the report of her visit—her first visit—being timed to fall in with his. It is in everybody's mouth—*that* and the Gresham gossip. Last night, at Bylands, that low cad, Jack Colquhoun, offered to bet me that Felicia would take the Marquis and jilt the Captain—it was after dinner, and he was half drunk, but it is a nice portent for a girl when her name begins to be bandied about in bets. George Sylvester fumed, I can tell you.”

“Whose fault is it?” said I. “Or do you not exaggerate the facts? What men bet over their wine, especially men like young Colquhoun, does not signify. We are neither the wiser nor the worse for it——”

There was a pause of silence; Mr. Tom Bethell walked to the window and walked back again, in preparation, as I hoped, to leave me. But he had yet a few more last words to say; returning to the charge.

“And you persist? You will continue to support Felicia against her father, and against all of us?”

“I *will* support Felicia. I promised her mother that she should never want a friend while I live, and she wants a friend *now*. I count you all her very enemies in this business. For her father, I believe that he would soon give way if he were let alone—her grandmother as well. For *you*, I will not say

what I think—God knows the secret motives of your conduct—perhaps you know them too; it is not with me you will have to reckon if you are tempted beyond the limits of right and kindness. If you covet Felicia's place——”

“So God help me, I do *not*!” he asseverated with ugly vehemence. I shuddered, and turned away. In that moment I had a dreadful glimpse of what a man yielding himself wholly to the tyranny of one wicked desire, may become capable of. He would have laughed and rejoiced in his heart if Felicia had been brought home *dead*.

Dear child! she was far from that yet. There she was caracolling in the road, in front of the house to attract my attention. I opened the lattice, and saw Mr. Barrington beyond, just turning in at the Manor-gates.

“Safe home again, Cousin Clare, and how d’ye do?” cried Felicia. The defiance of her! the spirit! This was to show her papa that she meant to hold fast to her friends.

“Your Uncle Tom is here—has been waiting here an hour or more,” announced I, to forestall any greater indiscretion.

The gentleman came forward, and Felicia, supposing that he would come over to the Manor presently, moved off.

Poor Uncle Tom! I had some compunctious visitings when he was gone, for the cool sobriety of temper that had enabled me to discern his cruel wishes and intentions, masked speciously as they were under the guise of family pride and honour. I

felt the sort of pity one experiences for weak men made miserable by their master-passion urging them towards bad ends full of disappointment. For Tom Bethell was not all bad, any more than the rest of us. He had warm love for wife and children. He recognized the iniquity of proposing to give Felicia to the Marquis of Leigh. It was the love of money that was corrupting him. Nature, providence, law, had been unjust to him (thus he reasoned and resolved) in giving to him, the father of a dozen sons and daughters, so small a portion of the family wealth, while on the one girl of his elder brother, they had accumulated all the substance of the house. Dispossess her, he could not; therefore he envied her: and envy indulged had grown, at length, into active malice. And, ah! how it made him suffer! He was not half the man that he used to be. His figure was shrunken; his visage had lost its healthy colour. Envy was turning his hair grey, spoiling his temper, his life altogether. If he could have been content with what he had amongst those bonny bairns of his, what pure and satisfying happiness he might have found in his straightened lot. But no! He had set his mind against his lot as a perpetual wrong; and despised the day of his poverty with a stealthy wish that the fates would be propitious, and enlarge his horizon by-and-by; and give him leave to rest and be thankful a little while at Stoneleigh, before he died.

Therefore I was sorry for him—sorry as I should be for a man blindfold, whom I might see walking perversely in a painful and dangerous way, without the power to guide his feet into a safer track.

CHAPTER XV.

"A Demonstration."

"I CAN assure you that the neighbourhood regard it *quite* in the light of a demonstration."

Miss Colquhoun was the speaker; the event which the neighbourhood had regarded in the light of a demonstration was a luncheon-party at the Manor, the day after the return of Mr. Barrington and his daughter from Lowndes Castle. At this "demonstration" I assisted, and Miss Colquhoun would have me believe that the luncheon-party, which was made for the Marquis of Leigh and his sisters, was intended to be a sort of informal announcement to the world of a negotiation pending for an alliance between the Castle and Stoneleigh. It had not occurred to me that such an announcement was intended, but I could understand how the gossips with a gift of minding everybody's business but their own, might treat it from that point of view, having already greedily accepted the original sketch of the plot.

The luncheon-party, however, "demonstration" or no, was not by any means an unimportant affair. Arthur and I were invited, and Felicia added to her note a sweet entreaty that we would not fail to

come; for she had succeeded in bringing her darling papa round, so far as Helen and I were concerned, and she desired above all things to avoid any interruption of our friendly intercourse. She added that she had refused to see her Uncle Tom the day before, and he and her papa had got to high words (no new thing), but she did not wish to quarrel with even poor Uncle Tom, so to make up she had asked her Cousin Rosy to come and stay at the Manor, and help her entertain good old Mrs. Clarissa Constable, who was to arrive the next day.

Arthur would have preferred to decline the invitation, but I had a great curiosity and desire to be there, and my desire was not lessened when I saw Old Crotchets trot by on his bay nag. He turned his head as he passed our house, and said, no doubt, to himself, that in that snug parsonage lived Helen's sister. I was longing to see them together, since I had acquired so lively a personal interest in him, and I called to Arthur in his dressing-room to make haste. But my good man never hurried himself, and was never late. Mrs. Bethell, from the Dower House, drove by next with Archdeacon Colquhoun, to whom she had given a seat in her carriage. In quick succession followed George Sylvester, Lady Abershaw, and her eldest daughter. Arthur then declared himself ready, and waiting for me, and we were ushered into the long drawing-room at the Manor just in time to see the four-in-hand from the Castle drive up, the Marquis handling the ribbons. Four ladies got out—Lady Augusta, Lady Mary Trevor,

her younger married sister, and a modish French lady with her daughter, both singularly plain, but most exquisitely dressed.

Felicia had the prettiest unconscious dignity in receiving her guests, a duty that for the moment quite absorbed her. One word and kind look from her, and I fell back with Helen, to whom advanced Old Crotchets, and with a quaint courtesy begged a new introduction to me.

“Geoffry—Clare,” said Helen with a rosy smile and a merry twinkle in her eyes—it sounded just as if she called him by his popular *soubriquet*. But, in fact, that was dismissed, now and for ever; for though, as yet, their pact was revealed only to Arthur besides myself, it was one of those secrets neither desired to keep; and I believe the majority of the guests that afternoon carried it away for another piece of wonderful news.

Mr. Barrington was as ever, handsome, gracious, graceful, winning, captivating. When he spoke to a woman, he had the air of paying her a compliment; every woman to whom he spoke received the flattering impression that he was devoted to her. What a contrast he was to the Marquis! I think everybody must have made the remark. The Marquis was far too great in his own imagination to condescend to pleasantness—but why do I say “to condescend to pleasantness?” He was incapable of it; had none of the qualities that go to its making. He was dull, ignorant, conceited beyond description: a short heavy bolster-like figure, with a low bullet head, a mulberry face, and close-cropt black hair—a mean and vulgar

type of visage, made more ugly by gross dissipation. He looked now, at mid-day, as if he were half-drunk; for drinking was his notorious vice.

“Surely he must have been changed at nurse,” was Helen’s commentary upon him. And he might have been! His father, his sisters had quite the grand air, but if he had not been “The Marquis,” anybody might have said of him: “What a lout!”

At luncheon his seat was next to Felicia’s, but I did not see that he either addressed her, or she him:—his presence was honour enough, compliment enough to win her without more trouble, so, no doubt, he felt. She was charmingly unaware of any intention on his part, and left him to enjoy his self-absorption while she spent her amiable civilities upon George Sylvester, at whom the Marquis stared with the concentrated stupidity of an owl. There was vivacious talk enough up and down the table without any contribution from him, but at intervals his name boomed forth from Archdeacon Colquhoun, and was signalled by Mr. Barrington, though still without the effect of drawing him into conversation. In fact, the man could *not* talk. By the ladies of his own family, and others, he was as much ignored as if he had been no Marquis or eldest son at all, but a mere commoner of the least desirable sort. And the adulation that was accorded to his rank as rank, in his absence, dropped into something like oblivion when he was there. A very slight familiarity with his appearance served, in most minds, to breed contempt. I speak of him thus in detail, because there really was at this time (as I learnt after-

wards) an idea in both families that a marriage between him and Felicia was perfectly feasible. The kind, mild, foolish dowager was ready to consent to it, though it must have been pain and grief to her to watch his fashion of wooing. The old lady was as honey and butter to Felicia, and Felicia was almost as dulcet, but I knew the gentle antagonism that was hardening between their two minds. To sit at a play when you have no feeling for the actors is a delightful study, but where their affections, fears, anxieties are ours, the interest is too deep for pleasure. All on the surface was gay and genial here, but below the surface were the beginnings of many sorrows, and even before the day was done, they were thrusting themselves into sight.

I have often thought since what little account the gossips out of doors made of an incident which occurred during this "demonstration," as they were pleased to call it, which was to everybody present at it, *the* incident of the day.

We were at an end of luncheon, or nearly so,—I remember I had just finished eating some delicious white Muscat grapes,—when a soft universal commotion, which I cannot better describe than as a *thrill*, turned all eyes in the direction of the door, at which the old butler (the Stoneleigh servants were all old in service) was just introducing another guest. Confusion! it was Captain Gresham! He hesitated perceptibly, as one amazed at what he saw, and not quite sure of his welcome. But Mr. Barrington's exquisite urbanity was equal to the occasion; the momentary embarrassment vanished—all but the

fleeting joys upon Felicia's face. *That* told a tale! She glanced at her father, at Prince Charming, at me, with an amused, yet shy alarm:—it was a queer little scene for those who were in sympathy with the lovers. Mr. Barrington fortunately was lord of himself, and of all of us. He gave Captain Gresham his hand with a cordial grasp, inquired where last he had sprung from, and bade him find a seat at the table: (he found one next to Felicia, by the aid of old John, and the kind connivance of George Sylvester.) I must confess that I thought them bold to audacity—but that is the privilege of love and youth. When we filed back into the long drawing-room, Captain Gresham filed in with Felicia, as if he had been there from the beginning of the feast, and no Marquis were in the case. How beautiful it is to be people of the world, and always to have your feelings and behaviour in public well under control!

The last comer assuredly won the suffrages of the ladies. His reception by all as they clustered round him (for all knew him except the French strangers) had the graceful warmth which belongs to sincere liking and admiration. The dowager herself was bland as summer, and must, I am convinced, have drawn a comparison between the suitors for her grandchild's favour, very severe against the Marquis. Poor ugly man! he did nothing but stare at Prince Charming with the same absence of expression as he had previously stared at George Sylvester; and as for comprehending the comedy of the situation, that he evidently did not.

The elder of the French ladies (the wife of a

general highly distinguished in the Crimean War) when she heard who Captain Gresham was, desired an introduction. Being duly presented to her, he blushed by no means unbecomingly at the fine compliments he was forced to listen to. His name, she said, was known and honoured by all brave French soldiers, and by none more than her brave husband; and then she explained him to her daughter as a renowned hero, and the daughter made a smiling recognition of his heroism; while Felicia glowed like a red, red rose in his glory, now looking on the ground, now beaming in his eyes, as the lady might at whose feet he had been pleased to lay his laurels.

It was an effusive scene, not quite in English taste, but it passed over without awkwardness because the hero was of heroic figure. It would have been very funny, as Helen said, if the chief actor had not been on a level with his fame. But in that case probably the great French lady would not have been moved to address him in eloquent phrases, and there would have been no scene. I am not sure that Captain Gresham liked it,—young men have a lively sense of the ridiculous affecting themselves; but it pleased Felicia, who told me afterwards that she should always love and respect Madame for having given Prince Charming such a triumph in the presence of us all. It matched the honour done him by General Cartwright at her Peace Celebration. And whatever exalted him in the public esteem, she counted as so much gained to their cause.

There was presently a dispersion of the guests into the garden, Mr. Barrington leading the way with Lady Augusta, and the rest pairing as they pleased. Arthur disappeared with Archdeacon Colquhoun, and Mrs. Bethell called me to her side by the fire. She was not disposed to saunter on the turf amidst the dank falling leaves, and was as little disposed to be left to the society of the Marquis, who was also not inclined to walk. He had possessed himself of the newspaper, but after a very brief study of it, he cast it aside and pulled out his cigar-case; extracted a cigar, looked about inquiringly, and dolefully toyed with the weed, wishing himself, no doubt, in his own quarters, where smoke was not tabooed. The dowager understood and took pity on him—perhaps, also, she wished to be rid of him—I did—so she showed him the way into the winter-garden, by the sliding glass panels at the further end of the drawing-room. He nodded, and availed himself of the information, lounging heavily, unsteadily off. The dowager clasped her hands, and cast her eyes towards the ceiling.

"What a being!" she muttered. "He is far worse than I believed! He must have taken too much wine at luncheon. I am afraid that Felicia will never be induced to tolerate him."

"You mean that you *hope* she never will," said I, with irrepressible scorn. "I would rather see her in her coffin."

"Don't talk of coffins! Was it an arranged thing between Felicia and Captain Gresham that he should intrude himself at Stoneleigh to-day?"

"I imagine not—but I have spoken to neither since he came. Felicia looked as surprised as anybody."

"And infinitely more delighted. That silly old Frenchwoman will have given her another plea on which to maintain their equality. Such a fuss about his valour! What did he do that any groom in the army would *not* have done, if he had got the chance? He rode in the Balaclava charge, and so did six hundred besides; and during a night-attack of the Russians, when we were surprised, he beat off, or killed, or disabled three of the enemy who were assailing a wounded superior officer, and brought him alive out of the *mêlée*:—earning that sabre-cut, which Felicia calls a 'beauty-mark,' and he volunteered for the assault on the Redan, and got his second wound. I daresay it was all very courageous and proper, but any other man would have done the same. It was opportunity and luck served him, nothing more."

I did not feel myself called on to magnify Captain Gresham's noble deeds—they were well able to plead for themselves; besides it was but slaying the thrice slain to combat the old lady's arguments against his merits. I said something much more to the purpose.

"If you do not mind what you are about, you will have Felicia never marrying at all, and you and her father would not approve of *that*, though her Uncle Tom might. I know her so well that I can undertake to say that she will not marry Captain Gresham without her father's consent, though they

may have to wait years for it, but I am equally convinced that she will marry no one else. As for the hideous personage who has just gone out, she has not a suspicion of what is intended, and I should not like to be the one to inform her of the degradation to which it is desired to promote her."

Mrs. Bethell was silent and meditative for a moment or two; then she said in a deprecating tone: "He *may* improve—he is not past hope. He is three years younger than Lady Augusta, and can be hardly thirty yet—look in the *Red Book*, when he was born—It is not charitable to put him without the pale."

There was no *Red Book* in sight, and I did not care a chip what age the Marquis was. I sighed, and was dumb. But the dowager had still something to communicate:—"Since I last saw you the whole thing has been put on a clear footing. Lady Augusta has opened her views to me; Mr. Barrington is aware of them, and so, I may tell you, is the Marquis, or he would not be here now. The Duke has not been formally asked, but it is quite sure that no opposition will arise from him—therefore we have only Felicia to deal with—"

"How glad I am that Captain Gresham came to-day!" cried I with genuine exultation.

"That she may be strengthened in her perversity? And you consider yourself her well-wisher?"

"Surely I do—and again I say that I am glad Captain Gresham is here, and that it has been

seen how honoured he is, and how worthy of honour!”

“You are such a sentimental little woman! I allege nothing against Captain Gresham; we shall not quarrel with him rudely; he is admirable in many ways, and in fact, we all like him—except as a match for Felicia. And before he goes out of the country, he will have to be made aware that there is no hope of her for him; and that it becomes him, as a man of honour, to release her from the rash and disobedient vow she has taken in defiance of her family:—in that light it will be put before him.”

“You will find Captain Gresham hard to convince.”

“He will have much assurance if he persist in holding her to her word, to the loss of the brilliant prospect that awaits her acceptance. Think that she may live to be a duchess!”

“Think that she may live to be a broken-hearted woman!”

“I will not think anything of the kind. And I give you up for as foolish and obstinate as she is.”

The four-in-hand from the Castle came prancing and tossing up the avenue. What splendid horses, what perfect statues of footmen, what a noble driver in what a noble wig! And all these pomps and vanities might Felicia inherit! I was sure this covetous thought was crossing her grandmamma’s mind, and I rejoined to it mischievously: “Ah! but how much happier and better a woman she will be following the regiment!”

"Pshaw!" ejaculated the old lady, and turned abruptly from her contemplation of the gorgeous ducal coach.

A few minutes after entered the great ladies, Lady Mary Trevor inquiring of her sister anxiously, "Will Bertie drive home? I am always in terror when he is on the box. Tell Morris to drive and ask Bertie to come inside."

"No, no, nonsense! you are so absurdly timid," said Lady Augusta, hushing her indiscreet remarks. Then she glanced through the room, and asked where her brother was, whom she had left with us.

The Marquis was found slumbering amongst the ferns in the warm, enclosed winter-garden. He consented willingly to go inside the coach, and no doubt, resumed his interrupted nap the moment he sank into a soft corner.

"Now I shall breathe freely," said the heedless Lady Mary, and exchanged nods of congratulation with the French strangers, who seemed as much relieved as she was.

The grandees were the first to go, and the others followed in rapid succession, until only Mrs. Bethell and Captain Gresham remained besides ourselves. Mr. Cartwright went across to the Rectory with Helen and me, and in a good three-handed chat I learnt all their hopes and projects. Their engagement was to be made known to Mr. Barrington at once, and the marriage was to ensue about Christmas, or as early as a convenient arrangement could be made for Helen's giving up her charge of Felicia. They were to finish the winter in England, and go

abroad in the spring for a long tour, while the dilapidated Monk's Lodge at Beechcroft, which was Mr. Cartwright's ancestral residence, was being restored according to plans to be arranged between them before they started.

When I saw how contented and happy Helen was in her prospects, I had no longer the heart to begrudge her to the eccentric man of her choice. But I could not resist the feminine malice that prompted me to whisper how I thought a London tailor and *coiffeur* would do more to rejuvenate and polish him in a year, than she would accomplish without their aid in ten years. She coloured, and bade me leave his convention-alizing to her: adding that she liked him best as he was, and she would not quarrel with his country coats.

Mr. Cartwright stayed and dined with us, Helen having asked for a dispensation from the Manor on purpose. He started to ride home in the moonlight soon after ten o'clock, and when I bade Helen good-night a little later, we remembered that all these hours while we had been gay and cheerful together, Felicia was probably anything but gay. Helen carried her a message of warm love from me, if that could comfort her.

What passed at the Manor after the "demonstration" was over, must be detailed in another chapter.

CHAPTER XVI.

“Hard to be convinced.”

“Now, my treasure, take me up to your charming boudoir, and give me a cup of tea, and let me rest and be refreshed by your pleasant prattle,” was the dowager’s wily address to poor Felicia, when the departure of the guests left them the sole occupants of the drawing-room. Felicia was thinking wistfully of Prince Charming, who had escaped her in the polite fuss of leave-taking, and her grannie told her, with a reproachful shake of the head, that it was of no use wishing for him; he had been carried off by her papa, and she was not likely to see him again that day. Felicia pouted. Grannie said that was silly—childish. Felicia speculated whether the gentlemen had gone to the billiard-room for a game, and whether they might not like her for marker—and she went to see. No, the billiard-room was a desolate wilderness. She peeped into the library—that was equally a void. Her papa had a sanctum of his own, sacred to pipes, guns, and relics of sporting travel when he was younger, to which he occasionally retreated, when he desired to be very private. That retreat Felicia never sat down in, and rarely entered, for it was at the ex-

treme end of a long, cold passage, and it had a lobby and door communicating with the stable-yard, to which came the steward, the gardener and other men who had business with the master of the house. It was called the Justice-Room, because there the Bethells once did justice on tramps and poachers; but Mr. Barrington had declined to be put in the Commission of the Peace, and the old room had changed its character without changing its name. Felicia returned to her grannie.

"Unless they are in the Justice-Room, I don't know where they are," said she, deeply injured.

"My precious, it is necessary that your papa should have some conversation with Captain Gresham. Don't be such a baby! If you will not let me go to the boudoir and lie down, draw near me by the fire, and let me talk to you for your good."

Felicia answered by putting her fingers in her ears, and looking, I know, how bewitchingly naughty; for her grannie said it was impossible to be angry with her, but if she went on in that way, she really did not know how it would all end. "But I do, grannie,—it will end in your benediction, and our living happily ever afterwards," was Felicia's audacious rejoinder. Mrs. Bethell again had recourse to shaking her head—when grannie shook her head it was understood to signify something awfully serious. Felicia sat down on the rug at her feet, took her wrinkled soft old hand, and laid it under her cheek. And so, for a little while, they were silent; and there were a few tears that gathered but

did not fall, and a burden upon both hearts. At length said Felicia:—

"Grannie, you have lived a great many years in the world, and ought to be very wise:—Can you tell me what has made your happiness all the while? for I have never seen you unhappy:—Has it been your pretty house, and your nice carriage, and your plenty of money, or because you have never been without some one to love you dearly?"

"Surely, my own, it is the *love* makes the happiness! What a question! Life would be barren, indeed, without love. I have had my share, I thank God: kind parents, a fond lover whom I lost, a good husband, a good child, and now you, a good gran'child, with servants who have grown grey in my service, and, though I say it, troops of friends amongst high and low, rich and poor. Dearie, if God grant you as much comfort of your days as He has granted me, when you are old, you may say He has dealt bountifully with you."

"Grannie, I like to hear you give God thanks. It seems to me sometimes as if life might come to have no meaning. Am I like my mamma?"

"Yes, sweetheart, you are like her in the face; but she was more yielding in temper than you, and less vehement and intense; and, if I may say it, less wilful and perverse."

"But you let her be happy. I have been told what opposition there was to poor papa—and she began to droop, and you gave in, and they were married, and though mamma had sorrows, I *know* that she was never really sad in her heart as I shall

be if—if—Ah, grannie; *need* I say it?" a prodigious sigh crowned the argument.

The dowager was disturbed, and not prompt with her answer; but, at last, she asked, "Felicia, have you no ambition—no ambition at all?"

"Yes. But tell me what you mean by ambition?"

"To be the first lady in your county, to be a leader of society and fashion, a very great lady, indeed:—to live in castles and palaces, to be familiar with courts, to have jewels for every day of the year, to be the mother of the heirs of a long and splendid line."

"What chance is there of such a lot for me?"

"If such a lot were within your reach, would you take it?"

Felicia was silent now, musing, suspecting, fearing, trembling. "If Prince Charming held it out to me, I would take it—I would take anything from him, because I love him. But I would not take it from any other hand." A long pause ensued, Felicia growing restless, the dowager growing very much afraid of what might come next, and casting about in her mind how to close the dangerous colloquy. But before she could muster resolution to break away, Felicia spoke again.

"Grannie, is there a conspiracy to give me to that man who was here to-day?" she asked in a strange, low voice.

"Which man, my pet? there were several men

here to-day," said the old lady evasively, and trembling in her turn.

"You *know* which man," said Felicia—she would not utter his name. Her grannie did not answer, and she accepted the silence for a confession. Perhaps, too, she felt the quaking of the fragile old lady, for she rose up from her lowly seat at her knees, turned her face to the light, and began to say, as if half to herself:—"Oh! I wish I had died when I was little—before I knew good and evil! Grannie would tempt me to be a wicked, wicked woman. And yet she reads her Bible, goes to church, succours the poor and prays. She *prays*, and thanks God with her lips for a favourable life!—Is there any reality in heaven and hell? any real reason why one should strive to be holy, pure and true? Perhaps not—perhaps it is all a cunningly-devised fable."

"Stop, Felicy, my darling! don't breathe such dreadful words, lest God hear them!" cried the old lady, shocked, amazed, beginning to weep.

Felicia's eyes were dry and profoundly mournful. "If you are too strong for me, and separate me from him I love, you will make me hate my life, and cease to believe in God!"

"Felicy, you are speaking blasphemy!"

"Am I? You have put me into a strange confusion. Ever since I was a child, I have heard it preached that the world, the flesh and the devil, are to be resisted and overcome, and now I am invited to yield myself to them, body, soul, and spirit. Which is to be trusted? The Sunday elo-

quence in praise of a Christian life, built on the promises of an Almighty Father, a Divine Saviour, a Holy Comforter; or your eloquence, exalting the lust of the eyes and the pride of life, and the pomps and vanities of this wicked world which were renounced for me at my baptism, and which I renounced for myself when the Bishop confirmed me. I cannot have both—can I? If I fall down and worship the golden image of Mammon that you have set up, may I go on praying to the God mamma taught me to pray to? Tell me, grannie; you should know when you undertake to deal with my life.”

“I cannot answer you, Felicy; you talk so profanely,” said the old lady with a sob.

“*Profanely?* I thought once that I knew right and wrong. You advise me, do you not, to buy the place of first lady in my county, and jewels for every day of the year, at a certain price? all I am worth, here and hereafter—hope, joy, love, honour, peace, blessedness. A costly price, grannie, eh?”

“I will not listen to you mocking! You are a wicked girl to speak so lightly of sacred things! I wonder how you *dare!* You never used to do so. Is not disobedience to parents a sin?” burst out the poor old lady between sorrow and anger. “We thwart you in a foolish passion for a lover in every way beneath you; we propose to you a marriage that would raise you in the social scale and give you immense influence and opportunities—and you reply in a violent satirical strain, that we are tempting you to sell your soul!”

"And so you are, grannie! It sounds ugly, but it is neither more nor less than true; and I will none of your bargain! You do me wrong, all of you, and cruel wrong, and I set my face against your counsels from this day forth! I will walk by my own light—Ah, me! into what wild, presumptuous words am I betrayed! Let me go, grannie! we vex and grieve one another in vain!" With this Felicia ran out of the room, and ran straight into her lover's arms.

A pace or two behind Captain Gresham followed Mr. Barrington. Their interview had been held in the Justice-Room. "You may say good-bye to him, Felicia; he is not coming here again," said her papa, and passed on, entering the drawing-room, where she had left her grannie, balancing between grief and indignation. Indignation carried the day.

"You may give up all idea of marrying that stubborn girl to the Marquis of Leigh. She has a disgust for him, and makes a religious question of it!" cried the old lady addressing her son-in-law.

"I shall give it up with perfect resignation—you know I never liked it. I am in no haste to give her to any one; but if I *must*, I would rather give her to Gresham than to the other," replied Mr. Barrington calmly.

"You have not admitted that to him or to Felicia, I hope?" asked the dowager in acute dismay.

"No, no. I am worn out with listening to Strephon, as you are with listening to Chloe. These young people have so much to say for themselves. They will not take *no*, and be satisfied;" the per-

secuted father sighed for very weariness, and dropt into the easiest chair within reach as if he were suffering from the effects of the severest physical exertion.

“That is it—they are so hard to be convinced.”

Meanwhile Prince Charming and Felicia were in the half-gloom of the library, whither they had retired to accomplish their permitted farewells. They stood upon the hearth-rug, and the fire glinted up in their two pale faces. They held each other's hands, and were solemn rather than sad. A crisis was come which needed firmness, and their mutual love and confidence supplied them with courage to be firm.

“Papa has said it—you are not to come here again!”

“He has forbidden me his house, and denied me his daughter, but I have told him that I am *not* answered, and never will be answered but by you! I came over to-day for the purpose of seeing him, not knowing that you had such fine company—I urged my cause strongly, but he was as invincible with his *non possumus* as the old gentleman in Rome. He said hard things of me, Felicia—when I am not here, they will say the same to you. How will you resist their continual dropping?”

“I shall not believe them—I know better than they do. I shall not care, being convinced that you *do* love me!”

He assured her of it many times; her ears could not tire of the warm dear words.

“We might be so happy if they would let us,”

said she softly. "We might write and meet without contradiction, or feeling wrong."

"We must write and meet still. I shall not give up my privileges. You are bound to me now, Felicia—love and honour are at stake between us. No one shall take you away from me. But, my darling, they will vex you often! How will you bear to hear me slighted, accused of cold and mean self-seeking, of fortune-hunting?"

"I will *not* bear it! No one shall speak to me of you but those who speak kindly. There are a few. Mrs. Gower is my friend and yours. And I shall have comfort in your sister too. Mrs. Willis and I have taken to each other."

"Poor Kitty! She wishes you were not such a very rich lady—the common cry!"

"But you are not sorry, Paul? I cannot help it—it is not *my* fault," pleaded Felicia.

"She cannot help it! it is not her fault!—bless the sweet foolish tongue of her!—No, I am not sorry—though for a testimony to my honour, before those who imagine they have a right to impeach it on your behalf, perhaps I shall one day ask of you a singular devotion."

"What is it, dear Paul? Tell me *now*."

"Could you give up Stoneleigh, and go with me to India?"

"I could do more, much more than that—if it were not for poor papa. He would be so lonely——"

"I am jealous of 'poor papa!' He is my rival to be afraid of! If you have to choose between us

—what then? He consoles himself more easily than I should—You will prefer me? I love you best. You will leave father and mother, and cleave to me? I'll be very good to you, Felicia."

Of all her lover's speeches, monotonous and familiar, there was not one Felicia better liked to hear than that tender, simple promise: "I'll be very good to you!"

"I know you will," she said. "But don't let us imagine such a dreadful extremity as my having to choose between the two I love most in the world, and to give up either for the other! I should die of it! Oh, I was so angry and miserable when you caught me just now, but you have turned my trouble into hope again! Trouble never lasts with me long—They tell me I was born to be happy—the old women in the village do—and my name is a prophecy. Yet this is a strange life, Paul—To think we can be sure of nothing beyond the present moment——"

"Let the strangeness of life go! The present moment is *very good!* Your duty is plain: it is to love *me*, trust *me*, be true to *me*, and the same is my duty to *you*—no riddle in it, if we give ourselves to it with a simple mind. Then we must write often, for our mutual support and comfort in absence, and take every chance of making our absence short."

Felicia had almost forgotten their near parting, yet it was near, and very near. The inexorable warning-bell for dinner rang.

"Two letters, two blessed days in the week,

dear Paul, let what will come between! And am I to see you no more now? For how long? for how long?"

Her voice was half a cry—pathetic, sorrowful.

"If you will *dare* a little for me? Will you, my own darling? To-morrow? I want to talk to Helen—I have heard news of her—No, fair Eve, I must not tell; she will tell you at her own time. I will walk across the fields from Bylands, and down through the Great Oaks to the Parsonage:—come to meet me at noon—tell Helen you are coming. We must be bold, and venture something at once, to claim our footing; and we must do it openly."

"Yes—Paul," said Felicia, looking aside upon the fire, sunk now into a red glow.

He detected the slight halt and hesitation in her consent, and knew that she was thinking—"If *papa forbids!*"

It seemed a terrible thing, in fact, when reduced to practice, this defiance of papa. But she would maintain it—she was resolved to maintain it! He had always been indulged. *Her* wishes, *her* pleasures had ever given way to *his*, and each small renunciation of herself was a tax her affection had delighted to pay. But this conflict involved the sacrifice of her life, which could not be yielded without heart's-blood spilt. More was required of her than ought to be required, and she tried to harden herself to resist the exaction. But this hardening process of a tender soul is very slow; and what a real physical pang the struggle gave her when, after being awhile lost to thought, it suddenly smote her with its harsh necessity again!

"Yes, Paul, I will come," she repeated more decisively, finding that he did not speak; and she looked up in his face, her eyes bright with tears, her lips quivering. "I ought not to have anything to do with weeping yet;—promise me that you will not be angry if I am sometimes weak?" she entreated, creeping close to him.

He answered her with caresses and tenderness, but swore that he would never forgive her if she proved untrue. "*Never*, Felicia, so help me God, will I forgive you if you are not true!"

They were so thoroughly engrossed by themselves and each other that they did not hear the door open, or see who peeped in, but they started apart as the door was re-shut with creaking caution. "Who was it?" whispered Felicia, and they both began to laugh; for whoever it was must have been witness of the vows and kisses of the lovers, who were neither ashamed nor afraid. The interruption, however, warned them again that they must separate, and under this impulse of gaiety they said good-bye until the morrow.

Oh, the blithe variableness of youth! Janet was waiting for her young mistress with a face set to woe, (every one of the servants knew her woeful case, and all were her zealous partisans) when in came Felicia, roses, smiles and mirth. She asked Janet if anybody else was in the house besides her papa and her grandmamma. Yes, said Janet, Miss Reed was come. How so? Felicia wanted to know. Janet could not tell, but it soon appeared that Miss Reed had been dropt by the dowager at

a friend's house on the road to the Manor, with orders to rejoin company there at dusk. Felicia instantly jumped to the conclusion that it was Miss Reed who had peeped into the library, and she could not help laughing to herself at the shock the creep-mouse spy must have undergone in surprising the tender spectacle of a lover's embrace which the dim fire-shine half-hid and half-revealed.

"Dress me prettily for grannie," said she to her maid, and she was quickly and prettily dressed in blue and silver; and down she ran to the drawing-room just as her grannie was wending with the soft, slow motion of graceful age along the gallery. "Kiss and be friends, grannie. I was very naughty and cross," whispered she in a most Christian temper; and grannie acceded to the truce, though perfectly aware that it was unfavourable to her faction.

The glamour of Prince Charming was still upon Felicia, and she was all sweetness and indulgence even towards her enemies. Miss Reed had that to thank for the kind welcome the young lady of the Manor gave her,—*that* and no virtue or pleasantness of her own; for she looked a most uncomfortable and abject little woman as she stood curtseying and reciprocating Felicia's greeting with fulsome thanks.

Mr. Barrington entered the drawing-room the last, and with a certain uneasiness visible to Felicia for a moment, but which she dissipated the next by advancing to him with her customary caress, slipping a hand through his arm, and leading him from one table to another to admire her arrangement of the cut flowers which adorned them. This was their

ante-prandial amusement always when they were alone, and they were all but alone now. How sincerely relieved Mr. Barrington was to find Felicia so gay, the lightness and brilliancy of his conversation at dinner testified. Whatever his quality of conscience, he must have had misgivings often, that he did not use his daughter as she deserved to be used. His philosophy was to let the future take care of itself, and to enjoy whatever was enjoyable in the present. If Felicia had looked injured and unhappy, he would have felt dull and constrained; but she was warm as sunshine, and his pleasure was to bask in her sunshine. If he thought at all, he must have thought that it was in her mind to circumvent him, and still encourage her lover, and that this intention was the source of her cheerfulness; but even if she had told him in so many words, that thus and thus she meant to do, he would not have quarrelled with her about it then. For the time, the obnoxious lover was out of the way, and by the exercise of a judicious coldness and negligence he might probably be kept out of it, until circumstances worked the desirable change of feeling in Felicia on which the dowager bade him confidently rely. For the instability and readiness to be consoled of the feminine temperament was what the grandmamma devoutly believed in. It was the measure of her own experience and of her frequent observation, and she saw no reason to suppose that Felicia would prove steadier under trial, or more inconsolable under disappointment than other young women. The fickleness of her moods this very day tended to confirm

the old lady's want of faith in her constancy. She said to herself that if Felicia was so very much in earnest to loathe the Marquis, she would have been less in haste to repent of her angry satirical speeches.

The fact was that Mrs. Bethell did not know of the interview with Prince Charming, which had restored Felicia to peace and courage. Mr. Barrington had refrained from mentioning his leave to the lovers to say good-bye; and Miss Reed had found no opportunity yet of stating how her feelings of modest propriety had been harrowed by what she had seen when she peeped casually into the library. Thus the dowager was arguing against Felicia on false premisses, and, as a matter of course, was drawing false conclusions.

But during the night-drive back to the Dower House, the humble companion told her story, enlarging a little needlessly on the circumstances, considering that the old lady had once had a lover, and might think kissing no sin. Mrs. Bethell listened, much vexed and mortified in her mind, and yet with that abstract sort of sympathy with the lovers, which tempted her to repay Miss Reed's tattle with a most unkind rebuff.

"It is over now, Reed, and cannot be undone; but let it be a warning to you never again to peep into twilight libraries if you have any reason to fear there are lovers in the house. Your principles are well-established, but they might not survive the repetition of such an awful shock as they have sustained to-day."

The poor companion collapsed, and the rest of the drive home was accomplished in silence.

CHAPTER XVII.

Father and Daughter.

THE next morning Felicia and her papa breakfasted together. They had not yet had their private conversation on a certain matter. Mr. Barrington would have thankfully deferred it still; but as it underlay every thought of both, it could not fail to come uppermost bye-and-bye. Felicia began to speak of her visitors, who were to arrive in the afternoon—her Cousin Rose and Mrs. Clarissa Constable. Mr. Barrington expressed an opinion that anybody for a change was better than nobody. Felicia sighed; she was quite happy with her papa by himself, and said she wished he would settle down into an English country gentleman, and give up his *nomade* life, it was so delightful to have him at Stoneleigh.

“What inducement can you offer me to live at Stoneleigh all the year round? Will you promise to stay, too?” said Mr. Barrington.

“That I will!” cried Felicia. “I love the Manor, and would never forsake it of my own good-will. It is my *home*. If you were here constantly, we might gather some of the pleasantest society in the world about us—*now*, I confess that it is often dull. Of course, we should go to town in the season, and

make our tours abroad:—Oh, papa, it would be such a happy, happy life! *Do* think of it.”

“And by the time I have finished thinking of it and made up my mind, you will be about announcing that you wish to marry and bring in another master, and that you want your house to yourselves.”

“Papa, how unkind! No master of mine will ever push you out of your place here. It is large enough for us all. The Manor is *your* house, not *mine*, as long as you live. I would far rather leave it myself than that you should.”

“There will be some one else to consult in the event I look forward to:—though, certainly, if you marry as your grandmamma is ambitious you should, we might make an arrangement.”

Felicia rallied her spirits as she replied to this: “But, dear papa, I never shall marry as grandmamma is ambitious I should. I would rather die than do it!”

“There is no question of dying at present—I shall never use my authority to press on you any marriage you set your heart against. But, Felicia, do not delude yourself with the expectation that you can tire me out, and bring me to consent after a while to the foolish, unequal match you would make for yourself. Captain Gresham knows my views and opinions. There is a wide difference, mark you, between forcing you into a distasteful marriage, and hindering you of a bad marriage. I shall not act the tyrannical father to the extent of urging you into a union with the Marquis of Leigh, splendid as such an alliance would be for you; but I shall exert

all my power and influence against Captain Gresham. A more absurd and presumptuous proposal was never made than his for you! Tell me that you will give him up? if only for peace' sake. I cannot bear to live at Stoneleigh, except as I have done, if there is to be discomfort and discussion between us two."

Felicia trembled and was silent. What a bribe was her father offering! He would live at home, and be her companion himself, if she would agree to throw over her lover.

"Papa, I cannot do what you ask," she said after a pause of intense, troubled feeling.

"You mean that you will be disobedient?"

"Papa, I mean to wait until you change your mind, and think better of it."

"Then I can promise you, Felicia, that you will have a long day to wait!" replied Mr. Barrington in the tone of a threat.

"Well, papa, true love is patient—and the longest day comes to an end at last!" said Felicia roused to defiance.

Mr. Barrington flushed with anger.

"Is it to my death that you refer? I did not believe I had so unnatural a daughter!"

"Oh! papa, you will break my heart! You put words into my mouth that I never spoke—thoughts into my mind that would never have come there of themselves! Before two years are out, I shall be of age——"

"And then you will please yourself, and defy us all?"

"Papa, there is no one living but you and grannie who has any title to my obedience?"

"And *we* shall not have your obedience unless our wishes are your wishes?"

"Since we cannot agree, let us leave talking of it until that distant day arrives!"

"And meanwhile, do you promise to break off all correspondence with Captain Gresham? do you promise to avoid meeting him, whether in private or in public?"

"On the contrary, papa, I propose to maintain with him as close an intimacy as I can, consistent with your having forbidden him your house. We hold ourselves engaged."

"That is a bold challenge, Felicia! Then let it be war between us, and prepare yourself for changes. Mrs. Gresham must leave you. We must give you another friend—one more watchful and judicious. Miss Reed shall take her place."

"It is a spy and jailor you will set over me, then! Oh, papa! why will you make me so miserable? It would not have happened thus if my dear mamma had lived!"

"No, she would have nipped your follies in the bud, instead of encouraging them as your interested friends have done. Mrs. Gower and Mrs. Gresham have been the chief agents in the mischief."

"You acquitted them of all blame yesterday."

Breakfast was finished some time since, and Mr. Barrington abruptly terminated the painful conversation by rising from the table, and leaving the room. Felicia came over to the Rectory to me to tell her

troubles. I had the whole story, and a repetition of what had passed between her and the dowager, and her and Prince Charming the day before. It was all very tiresome and perplexing, and I introduced a fresh complication by confiding to her Helen's engagement, which she had commissioned me to do. At the first hearing of the news, Felicia exclaimed that everything was against her; but after a little consideration she acknowledged, that if Helen must leave her, it was good that a pleasant way of leaving was opened, and that by this means the scandal of a quarrel would be avoided.

"And married to Mr. Cartwright, she will be another friend and advocate for you out of door," suggested I.

"It is odious to think how I am talked of! But I am not ashamed of the cause. At twelve o'clock, Cousin Clare, I am going up the hill to meet him. He is coming here to see Mrs. Gresham—you will have to send for her. He gave me a hint of something impending, but my suspicions had never been awakened, and I was not quick enough to guess the truth."

"I was as dense as you. When she told me of her engagement, I was quite taken by surprise."

"There is nobody to vex and contradict them! They will be very happy. I was always an admirer of Old Crotchets. I like his sentiment and uprightness, and his moral courage. Oh! Cousin Clare, I pray *mine* may not fail me! If you knew what a coward I feel in the presence of any one whom I

have grieved or made angry! I shake all over, and am fit to cry! Was it ever so with you?"

I could not remember that ever it was—I had quivered with wrath sometimes.

We proceeded to discuss her difficulties in the last aspect they had put on. Felicia was much annoyed lest Helen and I should be assailed as the authors and upholders of her rebellion, but I was mighty indifferent to any such dread. Mr. Barrington threatened more than he was likely to do, and I should not shrink from answering him as I felt, if he was so ill-advised as to say one word against either of us, or against Felicia, or against Captain Gresham. I was beginning to think of him as one of those utterly selfish persons who will pull the roof off a neighbour's house to light their own fire. There was no doubt that if a marriage between his daughter and Captain Gresham were allowed, he must give place to them at the Manor. Up to this time, and for years to come, its revenues went through his hands. He had the spending of them, and anybody with perception could see that less and less was spent upon the place each year. It was a sin and a shame, but who had a right to interfere? Mr. Tom Bethell railed and grumbled, but when had he not railed and grumbled? So long as Felicia remained unmarried, it was quite certain that her father would do what he pleased with her money, and she would complacently let him do so. It was by no means unusual to hear her say already that she could not afford such and such a thing to which she had a right, but I never knew her explain how her means

ran short. It was not through unbridled personal extravagance, I know; for she never bought a jewel in her life, nor did her father, who took so much that was hers, ever mulct his own indulgences to give her one. Like many men, lavish for themselves, he was *mean* for others.

I do not wish to say that Mr. Barrington set himself consciously and systematically to oppose his daughter's attachment to Captain Gresham because, by delaying her marriage, he could continue to enjoy her fortune; but I *do* think he opposed it the more vehemently because of the loss to himself that must inevitably ensue: for I do not think that a really loving, disinterested, high-minded parent would have opposed it at all. Helen was not so ready to acquit him of intentional wrong as I was. She believed and said that Mr. Barrington would keep Felicia single as long as he could, and her generosity of character would hinder her completely from imagining why; or if she did try to solve his selfishness, she would be sure to ascribe it to his affection, which was always exacting.

Miss Reed was mentioned, and the menace of her as Helen's successor.

"You will be able to hold your own now—you are not a child," said I; for to resist Miss Reed's appointment at this date would be of little use. I added, however, that it would be a great mistake, and they would never get on together.

"I shall never try. If she is set over me in the house, I shall treat her with courtesy, I hope; but

make her my companion, I never will," said Felicia with great decision.

Presently after this, she left me, and went through our garden-wicket, and so up to the Langhill on her road to meet Prince Charming. It was a venturesome step but I had not a word to utter against it. I wished her good speed rather, and a happy deliverance out of all her troubles by means of her lover. She was longer gone than I expected, and I sent for Helen to be with me when they came.

It was a dull, overcast day, thick with the fore-shadows of winter, and still as death. Looking up to the Great Bethell Oaks, the bronze, and orange, and crimson blotched screen of foliage showed as if painted on the leaden sky. The grass underfoot was ragged and wet with a heavy dew, and the fallen leaves strewed the green slopes with moist decay. St. Martin's summer was quite over and gone; it was the sad time of the year, when every day showed a change towards Christmas; when the poor began to wrap their thin coats about them, and the wreaths of chimney-smoke amongst the orchards increased; when the robins sang sweetly in the bushes, and flew to the window-sill for crumbs.

As Helen and I sat together waiting the coming of the lovers, a string of waggons creaked heavily along the road below the Rectory-garden wall, and my sister said it was the winter store of coal for the cottagers which by ancient rule was carted from Stoneleigh at the charge of the Manor. Felicia forgot nothing for other people whatever she might be suffering on her own account. The keeping up of

old customs had devolved upon her, and rather than limit any, she denied herself some luxury. Well! her heart was the better for it, and she heaped up blessings against the days of her affliction; and meanwhile, to judge from the lovely and glowing countenance she appeared with at my luncheon, what she had to bear was not beyond endurance. Captain Gresham was blithe as she was; a beautiful self-confidence animated them both! they had strengthened each other to resist oppression and persecution; and at the root of their content was a firm disbelief in the permanence of such oppression and persecution. They desired it so much that surely love must incline victory to their side soon!

What Captain Gresham had to say to Helen, as the widow of his brother, was soon said. He could congratulate her on her approaching marriage with a clear conscience; he wished her happy, and was only sorry because Felicia would lose the comfort of her companionship at the Manor at a crisis when she needed it, perhaps, more than at any previous season. Helen promised him still to be her faithful friend and adviser, and Felicia, on her part, promised always to give ear to her counsels. It seemed that Captain Gresham had the highest opinion of Helen's wisdom and prudence, and she merited it.

Arthur was absent this day at Archdeacon Colquhoun's, attending a clerical meeting, and he was not too well pleased to hear of the meeting that had been in my drawing-room while he was away. He said that it must not happen again under present circumstances. I pledged myself that it should not;

for it had gone, in some measure, against the grain of my own feeling of what was discreet and proper; but the young people had arranged it without asking leave of me, and I could not find in my heart to refuse them a hospitable reception.

They did not stay very long after luncheon, and Helen left with them, all three going up the hill again to walk part of the way back to Bylands together. They must have walked all the way, or have turned and turned again to keep each other company; for the sun had quite disappeared when Felicia and my sister returned through the garden. I opened my window for a word in passing.

"He is gone, Cousin Clare; I shall not see him any more until Christmas," Felicia said.

"Christmas will soon be here; keep up your heart!" exhorted I, in my cheerfullest tone.

"I shall do my best, but it is very hard without him to help me. If I could see him oftener, I should not want courage."

"There will be his letters——"

"Ah! but a letter is not like his voice!—I must not stay now; you have not seen the Sylvesters' carriage arrive, have you? or Cousin Rose?" I told her no, she was still in time to receive her guests; and away she went.

In the avenue of the Manor (as she told me the next day) she met her papa, who stopped her with an inquiry why she had not ridden that afternoon.

"I have been walking instead:—did you not

meet Mrs. Gresham just now?" she asked, quaking inwardly.

"Mrs. Gresham has been walking with you?"

"Yes, papa." They looked at each other wistfully, for they had parted in anger; and Felicia was suddenly moved to make a full confession of the day's doings, which she followed up with a pathetic plea for absolution. "Don't be vexed, dear papa—he is gone now. Tell me that I am forgiven."

"I am not so much vexed with you, as I am disgusted with those who encourage you—He is gone, you say? Then let me hear no more of him! You will forget him soon in a multiplicity of distractions: out of sight, out of mind, you know. Be a good girl, Felicia, and let us be friends."

This offer of peace surpassed her fondest hopes. She refrained from any further allusion to her lover, and accepted the truce with gladness. She took her papa's arm, and walked about the grounds with him, and made such progress in the way of amity as would have been impossible unless both had tacitly agreed to be deceived. Whether this hollow peace was wise, need not be debated; it answered its purpose for the time, and made them easier together, and better pleased with themselves and one another while it lasted.

CHAPTER XVIII.

Some Guests at the Manor.

WHATEVER the gossip of the neighbourhood, no one who stayed at the Manor during that autumn could carry away any impression but that Mr. Barrington and his daughter were on the best possible terms. The house was never empty of company, and with her social and domestic duties so much extended, I saw less of Felicia than I had done at any time since her return from London. Mrs. Clarissa Constable who was the first of the series of visitors, paid a very long visit at Stoneleigh—outstaying, in fact, several who came later than herself. She was averse to move, as it seemed, when she was comfortably settled; and it required no extraordinary shrewdness to discern that the pious old lady had a great yearning towards Felicia as a wife for her favourite nephew, George Sylvester, who came over to the Manor from Bylands almost every day while she was there. I think George himself had a little renewal of hope at this time, for Mrs. Clarissa's aspirations were not frankly discouraged. Felicia was affectionately kind and nice with her, and made her as happy as possible by patiently abiding her *sermonettes*, and by inviting to see her of an afternoon Miss Colquhoun,

and other ladies of that type, who delighted to discourse at interminable length on the philanthropic schemes to which they devoted their energies, and the money contributions levied on the reluctant pockets of their friends. As the rector's wife, I was called often to these assemblies, where I sat in the lowest place, receiving now and then a by-word of explanation, as one in the outer courts of godliness, not worthy yet to understand its inner mysteries. I hope and believe that there was a body of sincerity amongst them, but they grimaced so much, and praised and lauded each other's pious and meddling endeavours (the infinitesimal benefit of which I knew through Arthur but too well) until a spirit of mockery quite triumphed over my weak faith, and I ended by thinking them a set of very presumptuous and self-righteous folks.

"How came Mrs. Clarissa Constable into the unsanctified regions of Stoneleigh Manor? Is she established here for life?" Mr. Ralph Barrington asked me. He arrived in the third week of November while she was still there.

I told him what I knew, adding of my own opinion, that she was a very good old thing.

"The worldliest old Pharisee in London," rejoined he. "She is intent on capturing Felicity for her nephew George."

"Small blame to her for that! George would be very glad to capture Felicity himself; and his heirship to Mrs. Clarissa's fortune gives him a title to try if he can."

"Ah! but Felicia is a prize for his betters! she

will make a fine duchess—she has given Gresham his *congé* I hear.”

“I know nothing of that, and don’t believe it. Who told you?”

“Her father. He says it is quite at an end, quite broken off; she has not spoken of him for a month. There is a silent understanding between them that it is all over. She would not play double, and deceive him?”

“No, but he may please to shut his eyes, and not see what is plain before them. Felicia is as much pledged to Captain Gresham as ever she was, and I assure you that it would be her last wish for anybody to imagine otherwise. It is not necessary to assert a resolution every day if you mean to adhere to it.”

“Perhaps you know best. But the dowager’s candidate has not retired, has he?”

“He has never really come forward that I am aware of. They have not got beyond feeling the way, and Felicia met the little advances that were made with the furious repulse they deserved.”

“The Marquis is a cad—for my part, I think his brain is softening; but Felicia would make a charming duchess—if she could be tempted. Lady Augusta comes over rather often, and fusses tenderly about the victim—but she, to be sure, may have other ends in view.” I did not inquire what these ends might be; neither Lady Augusta nor her brother possessed the smallest interest for me, except as they were mixed up in the general gossip affecting Felicia. Mr. Ralph Barrington was further-sighted

than I. He had already detected signs of a future event which astonished my ears like a thunder-clap when it came.

I was sorry to learn from him that a disbelief in the reality and permanence of Felicia's engagement had been mooted. Before Mr. Ralph Barrington spoke of it, I had observed that it was no longer the staple of idle chat. Captain Gresham was out of the country, and the young lady was blithe and handsome as usual. Judicious people probably regarded it as one of those romances that drop quietly into oblivion in the presence of such practical chances of settling in life magnificently as were alleged to lie waiting her acceptance. Her grandmamma and her father, I know, denied her engagement to Captain Gresham distinctly,—distinctly, categorically, in some instances; and in others, they treated it in the light and frivolous tone which they had originally assumed in contradicting her right to make it. Of course, I was fully aware that there was no change nor thought of change. Felicia received her lover's letters and dispatched her own as often as she chose; and when she gave me a glimpse of her face in the twilight after her ride or her drive, we talked of little else besides Prince Charming:—a monotony which she excused by pleading that I was the only person to whom she could talk about him freely and happily.

The next time I saw her, I judged it no more than right to warn her of the doubt that was being cast on her constancy. She made light of it; she happened to be in a most buoyant humour, with a

precious letter, for an amulet, hidden somewhere about her.

"I cannot undertake to rectify public opinion which is so busy at my expense," said she with heedless gaiety. "So long as Prince Charming loves and trusts me, what care I who doubts? Papa is very good just now, and I won't plague him:—but *he* knows well enough that my mind is fixed, tho' he pretends to Uncle Ralph that I have yielded, and grannie knows too. Grannie is *naughty*; she tells positive *fibbs*! Mrs. Clarissa must preach her a little sermon on truth."

Then she rattled on about Mrs. Clarissa. "Oh, Cousin Clare, it is such fun to see them together! Grannie sticks up her chin, and looks scornily out of her half-closed eyes, and Mrs. Clarissa shuts hers quite, and lays her palms together with fingers outstretched, and talks like a tract, telling grannie how short her time grows, and how great her need is of serious reflection. Grannie never speaks any more than if Mrs. Clarissa were in the pulpit at church; and Reed sits by, the most provoking picture of piety!"

"How is it, Felicia, that when you get amongst these good people you lose your spirit of reverence and turn satirical and profane? It is not pleasant to hear you," said I.

"I suppose it is because I don't believe in them altogether," rejoined she. "I *do* think Mrs. Clarissa is honest, but she is *so* silly! She has taken up poor old Reed, and extols her as a very saint for patient virtue! Who can respect her discernment? If any-

body sets a dolorous grave face, and makes a profession of loving religion, she takes them at their word at once, and never inquires whether their profession is borne out by holiness of life. Cousin Rosy is catching their tone, and pretends to have serious misgivings about balls, and what Miss Colquhoun describes as 'promiscuous dancing.' I shall be curious to see whether her misgivings will prevail with her to forego the Hunt Ball at Gladestone next month. I should stand in great dread of Rosy's busy-bodyism and fluency, if she joined the community of saints who go about doing good in this neighbourhood."

"Don't be censorious, Felicia!"

"Don't be conventional, Cousin Clare! Mrs. Clarissa wants me to have a drawing-room meeting for missions to women in the east. If papa were away, I would indulge her—it would be such fun! *She* would speak, so would Miss Colquhoun, and a Mrs. Solomons would come, a lady who has travelled in India, and has been in some great man's zenana—she would tell anecdotes of how lazy and discontented the women are—so interesting, you know, oriental gossip. Would you mind having the meeting in your drawing-room?"

"Arthur would not like it—and besides, there is not space," said I, involuntarily thankful for our limited dimensions.

"That is only an excuse, Cousin Clare. The company might overflow into the hall."

"Don't tease, Felicia! Arthur would never give his consent. He has a prejudice against the tribe of Colquhouns and Solomons, and so have I, if I must

speaking plainly. He has never allowed me to dispense any but kitchen-physic in the village, and the spiritual food I am permitted to administer is only comfort. If anybody is really ill there is the doctor, and if anybody leads a wicked life, there is himself. Imagine then whether he would allow strange ladies to hold forth on heathen missions under his own roof?"

"I am afraid it is hopeless. Yet I must manage it somehow. I cannot disappoint Mrs. Clarissa of her meeting—that would be so inhospitable. I'll ask Papa, if we may have it at the Manor."

I expressed a wish that he might refuse his permission; but to my surprise, he did not; he took his daughter's view of it—that it would be *fun*: not considering whether it would be a lawful occasion for fun. Arthur made a remonstrance, but to no purpose. And on the Saturday after the meeting was first thought of, he brought me a copy of a neatly printed circular which he had seen in a shop-window at Gladestone, inviting visitors to a morning-meeting at Stoneleigh Manor, the following Tuesday at two o'clock, to hear an interesting account of the "Fenana Mission and the Mission to Flugu," by ladies engaged in the work. The local papers had advertised the meeting in a paragraph, using the same terms, and Arthur was in a state of vexation, distress and perplexity over the ludicrous misprints, such as I have rarely witnessed. While he was still fuming, in came Felicia, the merriest rogue, and with her Mrs. Clarissa Constable. Arthur displayed the circular, and asked an explanation.

"We have seen it—it is the fault of my bad

writing, I suppose," said Mrs. Clarissa, not one whit confused. "The printer has made a little mistake—Zenana and Telugu, it should have been. But what does it matter? The *world* will be none the wiser—it cares for none of these things."

"That is true," rejoined Arthur drily. "Perhaps if the *world* were treated with more respect by those who undertake its instruction, it might learn, and be interested in these things."

I was glad to hear Arthur say this. Religious teachers too often despise the natural intelligence of the people they are set to teach, and take no pains; the people feel it, resent it, and despise the teacher, in return, for insincerity and incapacity. *There* is a fruitful source of failure in many a ministry, which makes a fair show, and accomplishes nothing real.

The meeting happened as it was arranged, and numbers of people came, chiefly ladies, until the long drawing-room at the Manor was quite crowded. Lady Augusta and Miss Falkner drove over together, and Miss Colquhoun arrived with her brother, the Archdeacon. Mr. Willis brought his daughter-in-law, the Sylvesters and Abershaws shared one carriage, Mr. Tom Bethell presented himself with his elder girls, and there was a large influx of ecclesiastical persons, wives, daughters, aunts, sisters, grandmothers, from Gladestone. The majority were moved by curiosity for what they should see, and some asked if Stoneleigh was converted with the same jesting incredulity as certain men asked long ago: "Is Saul also amongst the prophets?" Arthur stayed

away, and would have had me stay away too; but Felicia entreated so earnestly that I would go to give her a countenance, that I went, little as I liked the affair. She was ashamed of it now—but it was too late to put it aside.

The Colquhouns were used to the sort of thing, and liked it; and the Archdeacon opened the meeting with a prayer, and a brief address, in which he introduced his friend, Mrs. Solomons, who was to be the chief speaker. Let me never hear a female gospeller again! For the space of two hours she flowed on in a stream of vapid egotistical twaddle profitable to nobody; provoking the light-minded to mirth and criticism far from convenient. In her own set she must have been exposed to the temptation of much honour and flattery; I was amazed to see Miss Colquhoun and one or two ladies besides, regarding her fixedly, their faces thrust forward, their hands clasped, their expression one of reverence, of worship almost. I could only account for their attitude by supposing their minds to be rapt in ecstatic contemplation, and their ears shut. Mrs. Clarissa judiciously dozed through the oration, and good Mr. Willis, with his hand covering his eyes, probably did likewise; but many present were not used to sleep of an afternoon, and if they could not escape quietly from the room, were obliged to sit it out.

Miss Colquhoun was to have addressed us, but no time was left her by the fluent Mrs. Solomons, who, however, accorded her a lavish measure of praise as one of “That noble, devoted band of women who give their lives to the work of saving

souls." Perhaps Miss Colquhoun would have preferred to speak for herself; for though Mrs. Solomons' sincerity need not be called in doubt, she was as conspicuously deficient in good taste as in good sense. Miss Falkner's face was a study through one paragraph of the exposition, when her brother, having been mentioned as encouraging Miss Colquhoun's mission to his navvies, was described himself as, "Not exactly what you call a gentleman, you know—an engineer;" and Lady Augusta was moved in another way by frequent references to persons of title, and especially to one as "The Marquis,"—some of the audience evidently supposing that the precious Marquis of our county was meant, and sorely perplexed to understand what his relations could be with the devout lady before them.

Archdeacon Colquhoun closed the meeting with a large tribute of thanks to the speaker, and a benediction, and then, with a rustle of relief that it was over, we all began to move. There was yet a little sale of needle-work to be effected, brought over by Mrs. Solomons, and Rose Bethell had set it out in the picture-gallery, and appointed herself head-saleswoman. Mr. Ralph Barrington, with his visage puckered into a thousand creases, was the first purchaser; he bought a wicker-basket, lined with blue silk, and then set off, groping and looking on the ground towards the drawing-room. On the way I met him, and inquired what he had lost, and what he sought.

"I am picking up Mrs. Solomons' H's that she has dropped all over the place. Can you tell me

which door she went in at?" said he, and there was a general titter, and a sly offer from several persons to help him, lest his task should be too heavy. Felicia heard it. She was flushed, tired and annoyed. The *fun* of the comedy was not to her taste. She did not like the *impromptu* bazaar, and whispered to Rosy not to invite buyers.

Lady Augusta came to the stall, and spent a shilling—there had been nothing to pay for admittance, she said; and while she was still selecting her shilling's-worth, arrived Mrs. Solomons, and added a postscript to her speech by telling us how her mission could not be carried on without money, and therefore she was obliged to solicit her kind Christian friends to buy the little trifles which other kind ladies made and sent to her—trifles such as we saw, dressed dolls, babies' braided frocks, pieces of needle-work, and other small matters. Poor Mrs. Solomons, I was sorry for her then! She was evidently short of means, jaded and anxious, though still garrulous. The measure of Lady Augusta's charity was the limit of most people's besides. Miss Colquhoun was generous to the extent of half-a-crown, and Miss Falkner to the extent of a guinea, which she paid for a hideous screen of worsted-work, displayed and extolled by Mrs. Solomons as very elegant and rich.

"Our English ladies' work is so *much* admired in India, nothing is so much thought of in the zenanas," she boldly asserted, quite with the air of believing what she said.

"Indeed! I should call such patterns as this

enough to raise a rebellion, on the plea of their importation being with the base design of depraving the native taste. I'll buy it myself, not to have that guilt on our heads!" said Miss Falkner.

Mrs. Solomons looked full of rebuke, but she answered nothing. It was sadly plain that the chief part of her collection she would have to carry away, if somebody did not make an effort. The company were departing by ones and twos and threes, and the stall seemed as full as ever. Mrs. Clarissa sat looking placidly on, and doing nothing—*she* for whose satisfaction the meeting had been arranged. She ought to have bought up the whole stock, but that was not in her mind at all; she had put before us worldlings an opportunity of doing good and receiving good; so far *her* duty; it was ours to use it, or to neglect it, as our hearts inclined.

When everybody was gone but the Colquhouns, who had brought Mrs. Solomons over, and Lady Augusta and Miss Falkner, Felicia asked me what she ought to do:—she could not send the poor mission-woman empty away, and burdened with the trash she had brought to sell.

"Give her a five-pound note, Felicy, and let her go," whispered her Uncle Ralph.

"But the stuff is worth fifty," whispered she in reply, and off he stalked.

The difficulty was ended by Felicy presenting Mrs. Solomons with ten pounds, and then, with alacrity the miscellaneous rubbish was packed up again to serve for the next drawing-room meeting. Somebody asked Mrs. Clarissa, when Mrs. Solomons

and the Colquhouns were gone, what was the final destiny of the dolls and other knick-nacks made in such profusion by idle pious ladies to promote the spread of the Gospel. Mrs. Clarissa said she really did not know, but she supposed that the articles not got rid of by private sale were sent up to London to the parent Society. Miss Falkner volunteered the information that it was *her* practice to buy things out of one charity basket and present them to another,—for instance, if Mrs. Clarissa would accept, for the conversion of the Jews, the frightful screen she had purchased in the interest of the Zenana mission, she would be most glad to give it for that purpose. Mrs. Clarissa accepted it with thanks, and Miss Falkner observed further that it would, no doubt, ultimately arrive at the parent Society and be destroyed. Destroyed? what did she mean? asked Mrs. Clarissa, brisking up at the ominous word—*Destroyed!*

“Yes, destroyed,” said Miss Falkner calmly. “I have repeatedly inquired what became of the things, and have always been referred to the parent Society; so I conclude that the Society’s housekeeper performs periodical acts of faith, and burns the collection—on the Fifth of November, probably, in the full assurance that before Guy Fawkes’ Day comes round again, all her cupboards and chests will be replete to overflowing.”

Mrs. Clarissa made an allusion to the seat of the scorner, directed against the easy-chair in which Miss Falkner sat, and Rosy Bethell whose new-born zeal was of the gushing sort, said, Oh, no, she was

sure such well-meant efforts never could be wasted. "Oh, I should like to be a mission-lady, or a Sister, or something," she went on, bubbling and effusive. "I don't think I should care for the Zenana women, like Mrs. Solomons, it must be so stupid teaching grown-up women to read; but it must be nice reading and talking to the poor men, as Miss Colquhoun does, the soldiers and navvies, you know, at home. I shall never care to go to another ball, and I don't think I will!"

Lady Augusta laughed, and advised her to make no rash vows yet awhile; and Miss Falkner drily stated that it was a rule of her brother's and Mr. Strongitharm's to allow only one mission-lady to one gang of navvies, and she must be big, hard-featured and middle-aged—as much like a navvy herself, in fact, as possible.

Mr. Barrington, who had stolen away from the meeting, re-appeared at early tea, for which Lady Augusta and Miss Falkner stayed, and I too, at an intimation from Felicia that she wished it. She confessed to me at good-by, that she felt as if we had all been very profane, and who was to blame? those who prosecute a religious work in a manner to bring ridicule upon it, or those who are the mockers in the case? "At all events," added she, "neither for Mrs. Clarissa Constable, nor Mrs. Anybody else will I ever promote a meeting again, unless my own heart be in it. I have spent a most uneasy day, for even the follies of pious folk are not a fit subject for fun."

Her own heart in it, bless her! I am sure there

was as much love and pity for the ignorant in her heart as in any heart of them all! A few days after the meeting Miss Colquhoun happened to call on me at the same time as Miss Falkner. Miss Colquhoun spoke of the meeting in terms of satisfaction. She said Mrs. Clarissa was an excellent counsellor of the young, and it was sweet to see dear Miss Barrington, possessed of every pleasure the world could give, turning so early to the paths of safety.

"I shall not repine if she has trouble to draw her yet nearer to her God, for her position is one of immense temptation," she continued unctuously. "No, Mrs. Gower, no, Miss Falkner, I am never sorry to see trials and afflictions laid upon any one whom I love; for I know that, in the end, they must work together for their good."

"I believe you. It is proverbial with what philosophy we bear the calamities of our friends," said Miss Falkner shrewdly. "But on the whole, I prefer to see mine happy and prosperous. Miss Barrington is good enough for this world—too good, I am disposed to think."

Miss Colquhoun assumed a countenance of depression; she had made up her mind that Miss Falkner was in a bad way, a godless, irreverent little woman, and she did not shrink from admonishing her to that effect, there and then. Miss Falkner took it very well, and offered no rejoinder. She was quite unused to the manners and phraseology of ladies like Miss Colquhoun, whose attitude was one of perpetual thankfulness to God for her superiority over other women. The gay, cheerful, variable, those

fond of amusement, and those apt to take short, practical views of life thought her a presumptuous and foolish body; but we all submitted to her admonitions meekly (so best were they abridged). Besides, she was tacitly allowed to have a right to teach and preach; she could rush in where most of us feared to tread, being gifted with a remarkable volubility, and also the sister of the Archdeacon. I have myself heard her ask a huge brickmaker if all was well with his soul.

When Miss Falkner had been duly rebuked and put to silence, Miss Colquhoun reverted to what she had been saying of Felicia, and then went on to express the relief and gratification she had felt in hearing that she had consented to give up the rash and impolitic entanglement with Captain Gresham. (Here was Mr. Ralph Barrington's tale again!)

"I am not aware of her having consented to anything of the kind:—when did you hear it?" asked I.

"Oh, everybody is saying so! I have no doubt of it myself. It has been improbable from the beginning to the end."

"There is no end yet, I can positively assure you. I should not deserve the name of Felicia's friend, if I suffered you to go away under that impression," I rejoined warmly.

"I had heard too that it was given up—Lady Augusta Leigh is very strong as to that," said Miss Falkner.

"And I am equally strong that it is *not* given up. Whoever asserts that it is, asserts what is not

true. You may take my word for it, who am chief in Miss Barrington's confidences."

Whether they did take my word or not I cannot tell. But this reiteration of the false denial, emanating as it assuredly did from Mr. Barrington and the dowager, caused me seriously to reflect. If they were so strenuous to make the neighbourhood believe the engagement broken, they did not mean to keep any measure with Felicia when the last push came. I judged it right to warn her again of what was currently reported, and gaining ground in the general credit; but though she listened and was annoyed, she refused to take any steps herself to correct it. She bade me adhere to my contradiction, and repeat it as far and wide as I had opportunity; but at the Manor, she alleged that it was best to be quiet, and let the time slip smoothly on until another crisis came of itself.

"I shall be equal to it when it does come," she said. "At present, there would be nothing gained except a quarrel with papa, if I insisted on proclaiming the truth. He would perhaps run away from Stoneleigh; and just now all the thoughts and kindness I can spare from Prince Charming, are devoted to making him happy, and teaching him to be content at home."

What could I urge against this? I held my peace; and the time went on.

CHAPTER XIX.

Some other Guests at the Manor.

MRS. CLARISSA CONSTABLE went back to London, not without hopes of Felicia for George. Mr. Ralph Barrington liked his quarters, and was easily prevailed upon to stay in them. The hunting-season was now well begun, and the Manor provided a mount for its guests whenever they were so disposed. Colonel Charteris and Mr. and Mrs. Mellish, foreign-made friends of Mr. Barrington, arrived on a visit, people not known in the county, but gay and delightful, capital guests for a country-house in the winter. Mr. and Mrs. Mellish sang, Felicia sang, and they became such inseparable allies, that as Mrs. Clarissa had done before them, they stayed at the Manor long after the busybodies expected them to go, and make room for other visitors. Mr. Mellish was very intimate with the Marquis of Leigh; Mr. Barrington was fond of his society; Colonel Charteris called him cousin. He had been born to a great estate, but he lived nowhere in particular now—sometimes in Paris, sometimes at Spa, Homburg, Nice; sometimes in the houses of indulgent friends. He and his wife were people quite out of the range

of my provincial experience, but some instinct warned me that they were as dangerous as they were charming. Felicia knew them as little as myself, but she quickly learnt to like them, when she found that their company reconciled her father to a more prolonged residence at Stoneleigh than he had ever been known to endure since the death of her mamma.

In fact, the Manor this season was very gay. Mr. Barrington kept open house. He and his gentlemen guests went out with the hounds twice a week regularly, and Felicia and the ladies rode often with them to see the throw-off. On the Monday before the annual Hunt Ball (the best ball of the year in Gladeshire, and, some people said, the best ball of the year anywhere out of London) the hounds met at Stoneleigh. There was a grand breakfast, and the morning being propitious for a good run, a large field mustered. I took my little people to see the gallant show; the handsome, spirited strong horses, the brave throng in scarlet, and the fox-hounds—a splendid, famous pack of which the Duke was master. The Duke had come to the meet himself this morning, and his son and eldest daughter with him; indeed, nobody of fox-hunting quality in that division of the country was absent, who was able to ride abroad.

The children and I passed through the house to reach the terrace, just at the time the gentlemen were pouring out from breakfast, and the grooms bringing up their horses. I had not seen Felicia yet, but in a few minutes she appeared in her riding

dress, and Mrs. Mellish with her, similarly accoutred. Lady Augusta followed them out attended by Mr. Barrington, and they all stood on the steps in a group with the Duke, Sir Jerry Abershaw, and Squire Sylvester, talking together, and watching the rest mount. The Marquis was moving about on the lawn, solitary, as seemed to be his choice; and the avenue was filled with a moving crowd of men and horses. Add to this the sunshiny haze of a soft December morning, the darkness of the close ranks of trees, and the rich time-coloured old Manor House for a background, and you have a winter picture, peculiarly English, and, to my mind, peculiarly picturesque and pleasant.

I have always lived in the country, and the cheerful sobriety of its out-door scenes never pall upon me. They are always fresh, always delightful. When the last of the cavalcade rode out of the Manor gates, the children set off to run down the orchard to intercept it at the bottom of the hill, and see the gay rout pass again. I followed them and Helen too, not at a run, certainly, but swiftly enough to make sure of not losing the sight. The hounds and huntsmen were just sweeping by; the Duke headed the field with Felicia, beautiful as the morning, Lady Augusta followed next with Mr. Barrington, then came Mrs. Mellish and Colonel Charteris, and the rabble of horse and foot till all were out of view. As we walked in the garden we heard the winding of the horn and the music of the hounds far away, and about two hours later Felicia and Mrs. Mellish returned, the first fox-hound having gone

away straight across the country, and further from home than they were tempted to pursue.

This was the first occasion on which I saw Mrs. Mellish in all her native simplicity. She did not impress me as a desirable friend for a girl, but then she had a delicious contralto voice which went perfectly with Felicia's soprano. When they were not out of doors, they were practising duets all day long. Musical enthusiasts excuse everything in each other but the want of music, and when Mrs. Mellish trolled out a rich joyous melody in a rich joyous voice Felicia was enraptured, and found her the finest company in the world. She was not a talker; she had, indeed, the reputation of never speaking, except when she had something pungent or witty to say; but the views she took of life were frankly free and easy, while her gaiety was of that bright, infectious nature that made them to be tolerated as they assuredly would not have been, if expressed by a less laughing pair of Hebe lips, and a less brilliant pair of eyes. Felicia described her notions as "very French," and with that plea let them pass. She herself was not of a character to imitate or affect anything; but Rosy Bethell who had a facile temper and was readily captivated by new models, formed herself on Mrs. Mellish's airs and graces, as she had lately formed herself on Mrs. Solomons' pieties—which was as though a prim little bantam should aspire to mimic a pretty little parroquet.

In the course of the day arrived several more guests at the Manor, chiefly young people from a distance, who were invited for the purpose of going

to the Hunt Ball the following night; and Felicia begged Arthur and me to run across in the evening, offering us the bribe of some good music, of which we were both amateurs in a moderate degree. I have a lively recollection of the scene in the long drawing-room as we entered. About the first fireplace stood Mr. Barrington, Colonel Charteris, and Mr. Mellish—the last a tall slim man with a face smooth-shaven all but the upper lip, which was ornamented by a small black moustache. His style was of the most elegant, his manner soft, insinuating, courteous, but the sly cunning of his eyes, which was expressed, indeed, from head to foot of him, in his gait, voice, his every gesture, repelled me instinctively, and on the instant. Colonel Charteris was short and stout, with a military air, and an ugly trick of plucking at his mouth—the only marked trait I observed in him. Clustered about the further hearth was a group of girls, all strangers to me but Rose Bethell; and several young men of whom I knew only Mr. Courtney and George Sylvester. Except that they made gay the Manor on the eve of a memorable ball, they have nothing to do with Felicia's history, and I need not delay it to describe them more particularly than this:—that like most young people they were nice and fresh-looking, and willing to laugh, talk, dance, sing, play, be amused in any fashion that was convenient.

Felicia and Mrs. Mellish were not visible, but from the music-room beyond issued the preluding sounds of fingers on the keys of the piano, and then their voices joined in a duet from "*Faust*."

Arthur lifted the curtain which separated the two rooms, and we passed through, to find a small select audience, which was presently increased by the influx of Mr. Courtney, and one or two of the less intimate girl-guests. At the end of the song Felicia inquired what had become of the others, and was told that they were warming their feet by a *galop* in the picture-gallery, for which Mrs. Gresham was playing the music. Then she asked where her papa was, and somebody said that he, Mr. Mellish, and Colonel Charteris had disappeared—were gone to the billiard-room, perhaps, which was their continual resort.

Felicia sighed, and I had no reason to wonder why. These two gentlemen were the choicest of Mr. Barrington's sporting associates. They were always found together, and wherever they were found *there* was mischief. So long as Felicia felt herself in duty bound to welcome them at the Manor, little was gained by keeping her father there. My Cousin Barrington possessed great command of countenance, but he did not succeed in hiding from his daughter's anxiety the fact that this visit of Mr. Mellish and his ally was being made a very costly visit for their host. If the billiard-room had seen the worst of it! But every night, shut up in the justice-room, they played cards, often till the small hours of the morning, and Felicia did not dare to hint a rebuke. Such guests had no right at the Manor, she was told; but she could not hinder it: remonstrance would be vain, and would perhaps end in driving her papa away as well as them. And that,

in her judgment, was as bad as anything that could possibly happen.

Mrs. Mellish and she had spoken to each other of this gambling propensity of their men-folk, but I am afraid that Mrs. Mellish assumed a virtue she had not when she professed to hate and dread it as much as Felicia. "They *will* do it, my dear innocent child! You might as well try to keep ducks from the water as to keep men possessed by the spirit of play from the green table. I used to fret and spoil my pretty eyes when first I found Jack out; it makes the misery of my whole existence still, but I have learnt to bear my griefs with patience." (And to use the pretty eyes as a decoy for fools into Jack's net, she might have added with equal truth.)

Mr. Tom Bethell, who knew a little of everybody, spoke of the Mellishes as hangers on to the skirts of society: not quite rejected and not quite free of any circle but the debateable margin occupied by people who have been "a great deal talked about." He stated it for a fact that Mr. Mellish had been blackballed at the Coverley Club, and that there were men who refused to play with him, called him the biggest scamp in London, and predicted a near day when he would be found out by all the world. But in the meanwhile, with the help of his agreeable manner and his charming wife, he maintained a precarious footing in many good houses; and country-folks, who knew nothing of his town-reputation, believed him to be a very fine gentleman indeed, and were sure that Mrs. Mellish was a most

desirable acquisition at any party, because she was such a beautiful singer, and always good-natured about singing.

Mr. Ralph Barrington eschewed the intimate acquaintance of his brother's friends: he had suffered too severely by such persons in time gone by to care to renew his lessons; but he behaved with a politic reserve in speaking of them, except to Helen. Helen was not intending to go to the Hunt Ball. She thought Mrs. Mellish might serve Felicia and her fair troop as *chaperone*; but she changed her mind at a word from Mr. Ralph Barrington, who told her that pleasantly and well-received as Mrs. Mellish was in certain quarters, it would be no advantage to any girl to be seen under her wing. Of this change in Helen's intention I had no notice until the night of the ball, when I went to the Manor, at Janet's request, to see the young things dressed to set off. I presented myself in excellent time, and found Felicia with her toilette already completed, and Janet gone to help some of the visitors.

My darling was resting in a vast white chair, all a crisp white cloud herself, and I hardly dared to touch her, lest I should crush something out of its place. I swept her a curtsy for compliments instead of a kiss. She had made herself lovely—lovely indeed; and in her eyes was a marvellous beauty and sweetness.

"Guess *why*," she whispered, and offered for my admiration a bouquet of hot-house flowers that were certainly not grown at Stoneleigh, nor arranged

by the fingers of Janet. I hesitated to guess aloud, though sure in my mind. She read in my face what I hoped, and gave me a gentle token of acquiescence: "Yes, *he* is to be there — Prince Charming is to be there! Imagine whether I am happy!"

I never saw anything like the soft radiance of her countenance as she sat reflecting on her great pleasure that was in store. At my invitation, she presently stood up, spun round to show her dress, and then went floating about the room, caressing her flowers, talking sweet nonsense to them, hardly feeling the earth under her feet for the joy that was in her heart. She was "fancying" in her pretty childish way some scene with her lover—for pure faith, and simple warm affection, she was yet half a child!

I forbore to suggest vexations, displeasures, perverse accidents, though they occurred to me. The meeting that was to be at the ball was a secret between them, which might have what effect it pleased, so far as Felicia seemed concerned beforehand. Probably Captain Gresham was quite as little troubled. I asked her if Helen knew. She said No, nobody knew by her telling. The bouquet and a letter had come in a box that afternoon from Gladestone by a special messenger, and the letter was to say that Prince Charming was then safe housed at the "Royal George," impatiently waiting for the evening and for her. His impatience, I think, could not be more eager than her own.

While we were discussing the matter Rose Bethell burst into the room, without any ceremonial polite-

ness of requesting admittance. She had broken the clasp of one of her bracelets; and wanted to borrow another from Felicia's ample collection. Felicia opened a case of everyday trinkets, but Rosy was fastidious, and had made her choice before preferring her petition; she wished for a certain turquoise band of exquisite Indian workmanship, and when her cousin refused it, she said in an accent of complaint: "You are not wearing it yourself, Felicy."

"No, but it belonged to mamma, Rosy, and I never like to lend anything that was hers," remonstrated Felicia sweetly. "Here are a dozen to select from, all birth-day gifts, and all handsome. If you want blue, here is a coil crusted with blue stones."

Rosy pouted, but accepted it. She was looking exceedingly pretty, apart from the pout, and Felicia told her so, to restore her good-humour. Rosy relaxed, and then, in turn, contemplated her cousin, pronounced her white dress perfection, but made some critical objections. For instance: why did she wear such plain ornaments when she had sets of divine pearls and exquisite opals and diamonds? What was that slender necklet of Venetian gold about her throat—where did she get it, and the heart-shaped amulet with a cipher in brilliants? What was the cipher? As she proceeded with her catechism, Rosy's wits sharpened. She peered for a minute shrewdly in Felicia's face, and then exclaimed in a most irritating, significant tone: "*Ah! Ah! I suspect something!*"

Felicia blushed, and turned from her, replying: "Suspect anything you like, Rosy, but don't chatter."

“So that is why your opals and diamonds must hide in their casket to-night? that *somebody* may be gratified with the sight of his *poor* little chain alone on your neck! Oh! but you are *deep*! You are *cunning*, Cousin Felicity!”

“And you are unkind, Rosy!” cried Felicia, flashing round upon her with sudden beautiful anger, the tears full in her eyes. “I deny nothing! This is his *poor* little chain—precious and dear to me beyond every jewel I have! I would give them all for one kiss of my love!”

Rosy made a modest *moue*, but she did not venture to inflict any more impertinent remarks upon her cousin. She was insignificant, but she could sting. Felicia had become extraordinarily sensitive to any word having reference to Captain Gresham’s narrow fortune; and it was many a year before she quite forgave Rosy for her slighting contempt of his “*poor little chain*”—which was, in fact, a perfect little chain and costly with its amulet; and must have represented several acts of self-denial on his part; for he was an honourable lover, and did not give his love-gifts at the expense of his jeweller. Felicia was greatly moved, and Rosy took refuge in the sulks. Perhaps it was lucky for the peace between them, that Helen soon came to the door, and created a diversion; followed in a few minutes by the rustle of many light skirts along the gallery, and the voice of Mr. Mellish calling from below that the carriages were come, and were waiting.

I saw all the party assembled in the hall, the girls a flock of white birds, and Mrs. Mellish as

young-looking and fair as any of them; Helen, by comparison, in black lace and crimson roses, was a sober dowager amongst them. The gentlemen gathered in great force too; for there were no recusants. The Manor omnibus was full, and the barouche and brougham besides; and when the bustle of packing in was over, and they drove off, a lull seemed to fall upon the whole place, and I had time to observe that the stars were shining, and that it was a fine frosty night.

Janet and Carr lingered with me a minute on the steps, and said Janet proudly: "Our young lady is the flower of them all, ma'am. There's not one to hold a candle to her. She's a perfect beauty, be the other who she may."

"But she has a deal to intercount with," added Carr sighing. "And it's not beauty saves from sorrow."

"God bless her, and keep her good—that's all I say! As for sorrow, which of us escapes it when our time comes? I prophesy that Miss Felicity is thinking none of sorrow to-night!"

I was of Janet's mind, who evidently had an inkling of her young mistress's secret joy and expectation.

It was nine o'clock and after, and all the village was fast abed when the "quality-folk" rattled off to the ball. This turning of night into day was an inscrutable mystery to the working-sort, and I have often thought it a paradoxical fashion too. But my experience of balls is absolutely *nil*, so that I have no right to express an opinion—unless I may say

that according to my observation a pretty girl never looks so pretty the day after a ball as she looked the day before it—and all for want of her natural sleep. Why don't balls begin at eight o'clock and end at twelve—but I forget, balls are no affair of mine. I was glad that December night to be going home, and was sorry for the old ladies and chaperones of many seasons, then on their cold road to a scene where all their part must be to look on, and keep guard over careless daughters, apt to prefer good dancing in a man at a dance to everything else that is good.

I sought Arthur in his study, and told him how gay all the young people were, and in what buoyant spirits they had gone to their ball. He looked up from his book, and asked, to my astonishment, if I should have liked to be going too. I assured him candidly that I should *not*. “Was I quite sure?” he persisted. “Quite,” I rejoined: I had not one longing or envying of that kind to spoil my peaceful life. We talked a little more about it.

Arthur had observed that I enjoyed the society of young people, was interested in their interests, liked to see their pretty attire for affairs in which I could not join, and especially to hear their adventures when such affairs were over. And from this he argued that it would have been only natural if I had coveted a share in the same gaiety as they freely partook of. I laughed, and told him I desired nothing impossible:—it was only wives and daughters of dignified clergy, who dared to be seen in the haunts of the world: when he was an archdeacon, and our

little girl was grown, then, perhaps, I would take her to a ball. Arthur did not say he should refuse us his consent.

I had seen nothing of the world before I was married, and since, I had only seen so much of it as the windows of a country parsonage may command. But I was very far from imagining that those who went to balls had a monopoly of its pleasures. My friends were often merry, and professed to pity my seclusion, but they had dull days between their gaieties, which I never knew, and disappointments, and mortifications, often very acute, from which I was exempt. Arthur was not one of the austere who think balls scenes of wicked dissipation—indeed, for his tolerance of them, he might have been dean or archdeacon already. He thought, and I thought with him, that a good dance is the best of all social pastime, for a crowd of young men and women, full of health and vivacity. The lightness of their heels looks like nature's dispensation to preserve them from a flux of idle talk. Dancing takes all their breath to keep it up with energy. With their fantastic toes they can do no mischief—with their idle tongues how much! *how much!*

Rosy Bethell, for so pretty a girl, was singularly neglected in a ball-room. If she had been a popular partner amongst the cavaliers, and more busy on her feet that night at the Hunt Ball, she would have had less dangerous leisure for jealous watchfulness and speculation on her Cousin Felicia and Captain Gresham; and perhaps some of the troubles that finally overwhelmed Felicia might have been spared!

CHAPTER XX.

What befel at the Hunt Ball.

THIS must be told all from hearsay:—everybody's story refined of its exaggeration; the residuum truth as clear, perhaps, as can ever be elicited from a contrariety of statements and opinions on complex facts, which can be but imperfectly known at the best.

The large party from Stoneleigh was late in arriving at the ball. There was some accident to one of the horses, and a delay on the road, but about half past ten the committee of reception consisting of the leading gentlemen of the hunt, with the Duke at their head, welcomed Mr. Barrington, his daughter, and their troop of friends, and then broke up their circle, and proceeded to take their part in the dancing.

The military band in the orchestra had just begun the overture to a lovely waltz; gentlemen were seeking their promised partners, and the young people who had come from the Manor together, paired promptly, not to lose it. Felicia's appearance, I have been often told excited a buzz of admiration as she advanced into the room. Suddenly, with an ungraceful bow, approached to her the Marquis of

Leigh—his first and last effort for a partner that night. What she said to him no one heard, but his rejection was palpable, and he stepped back. Then instantly, from a little knot of brilliant uniforms, glided Captain Gresham, and with never a word at all, but only a happy look in his face, Felicia gave him her hand, and away they flew round the maze, the observed of all observers.

That Mr. Barrington saw both incidents as coolly as if he saw them not, I, knowing him so well, can well believe; and that more persons admired than disapproved, I am certainly convinced. Helen said she never saw a decisive thing so boldly yet charmingly done; and the gossips whispered one to another that it would be of no use to deny the engagement after *that*. Their few adversaries, of course, wondered at Captain Gresham's impudence:—most women were of his party, but there were exceptions; Rosy Bethell, for instance, who thought it *dreadful*, and was inexpressibly shocked that her Cousin Felicia dared to defy her papa; she was sure *she* never could behave so.

“Wait till you are tempted, my dear! but I don't suppose that you ever will be,” quoth Mrs. Mellish, to whose discreet ears Rosy confided her sentiments of horror.

Rosy reddened. She did not seem flattered by the suggestion that she would probably never be tempted to misconduct herself like Felicia, and little Mrs. Mellish chuckled quietly at her evident chagrin. She was a very mischievous little woman. I do not mean *malicious*—but she had a wicked delight in

subverting pretences to superior virtue, where the reality did not exist; as it did not in Rosy's case. My sister Helen had the young lady on her hands the chief part of the night; for Mrs. Mellish danced every dance; and poor Rosy, though she could not *quite* stay away from the ball, according to her brief pious impulse, kept a sort of compromise with her conscience by resolving only to stand up for quadrilles. The deprivation of waltzing, polking, galloping, was the less painful that nobody asked her:—in fact, she was a halting, dragging partner who could not keep time, and was avoided as dangerous, a bringer-on of collisions, a render of flounces. “That blundering Miss Bethell,” a cross girl whom she had once driven violently against a pillar, called her loud enough to be heard across the room, and from that night forth, not even kind George Sylvester invited her to waltz. There is some such pretty, awkward, Spanish cow at all large dancing assemblies, a terror in the ring to nimbler dancers. Is it this sort of girl who tires of balls early, and gives them up as unsatisfactory? Mrs. Mellish was like a sylph on her feet, and would go on dancing to the last day of her life and health. There was nothing in the world, she frankly avowed, that she enjoyed so much.

Perhaps Felicia might have made the same confession that night. Her eyes shone with pleasure; her whole air was animated by the delight in her heart. *She*, also, danced every dance: the quadrilles with anybody, with her faithful shadow George Sylvester, with Major Trefusis, with Tom Claylands,

with anybody, though by preference with acquaintances rather than strangers. But others beside her Cousin Rosy made a note of the fact that she saved all the "round dances" for Captain Gresham. She did not come near Helen before supper, but at supper, when she appeared with her lover in attendance upon her, the anxious *chaperone* had the opportunity of hinting the desirableness of a less demonstrative behaviour. "*That* affair broken off! It looks very much like it, indeed!" everybody was sardonically remarking.

Mr. Barrington had recognized Captain Gresham's presence, and they had exchanged a few words; but it was patent that the words were not friendly, nor the recognition cordial. He did not, however, interfere with his daughter though, to Lady Augusta, he freely expressed his annoyance at her wilfulness. Lady Augusta counselled indifference or resignation. She said she plainly perceived in Miss Barrington a young lady who would have her own way—and probably added a mental reservation that, in Miss Barrington's place, she would do likewise. Captain Gresham was a man who, as a lover, was not to be lightly set by. His noble carriage, his bold frank air, the lively sweetness of his countenance, created much genuine sympathy for Felicia, who, gay and brilliant with excitement, seemed to be asserting silently: "*I will* be happy to-night, let what may come after! They have dared me to it, by setting abroad what is false—now all the world that pleases may know the truth!" Their well-wishers increased, and sentimental folks whispered one to another:

"What, after all, did money matter, so that there was enough between them? They were a beautifully-matched pair, born for one another, if looks went for anything, and it would be a sacrifice to part them." Helen agreed with the sentimental folk.

From the supper-table Felicia returned to the ball-room, and in the *galop* that followed the supper, her lover was again her partner. Mrs. Mellish said to my sister, laughing, "I am quite on their side, but one must allow that the lovely Miss Barrington is *very* daring, *very* venturesome, indeed! She has given her Prince Charming quite triumph enough in the sight of their adversaries for one while."

Rosy Bethell, disengaged, demure, kept strict account of her cousin's delinquencies. "This is the fifth time Felicia has stood up with Captain Gresham. Is it not contrary to etiquette?" she asked Helen.

Helen answered her discouragingly: "Perhaps it is contrary to etiquette; but she is fond of waltzing, and it seems that she will not waltz with any gentleman besides. A *galop*, is it? It comes to the same thing—you know what I mean."

"Captain Gresham will not *let* her waltz with anybody but himself—that is the fact."

"His brother had that prejudice too. Captain Gresham waltzes perfectly, and she does not seem to wish a change of partners; she could not change for a better amongst those we see."

"Oh, Mrs. Gresham, how *easy* you are! Papa says it is quite disgusting."

"He is no judge, Rosy. He loves neither of them, more's the pity."

"Why is it a pity? Why should papa love what he calls in bad taste? Cousin Felicia must be very forward and bold to flirt so with Captain Gresham before everybody's face, and he nothing but a needy fortune-hunter. Papa is *always* talking about them, and wondering why Uncle Barrington does not put a stop to it."

"That does not make what papa says more true or more judicious. You forget that Captain Gresham is a dear friend of mine, and a gentleman of high reputation, except amongst a few persons who may have private ends to serve by maligning him. And your Cousin Felicia is no flirt—we do not call it flirting when a lady is sweet and gracious to the man she has promised to marry. You must not measure her feelings by your own—you are not qualified to have an opinion. She is a generous, noble-hearted girl, good as she is lovely; and if she be a little defiant, only those are to blame who would rob her of what cannot enrich themselves, though the loss will make her poor, indeed."

"I was not thinking of Stoneleigh. *We* never look to come into *that*. Papa is sure Felicia will marry some day, and if it is not Captain Gresham, it will be some other *detrimental* or dashing adventurer."

"We are talking at cross purposes, Rosy, and here is Mr. Abershaw coming to ask you to dance. Go and dance."

Rosy went, the artless, indiscreet prattler, and

into the vacant seat by Helen, dropped Mr. Ralph Barrington.

“Mistress Felicia is resolved that there shall be no mistake about her preference after to-night,” was his opening remark. And then he proceeded to criticize her elegant appearance, and to say that the prettiest picture in the world was the face of a pretty girl with her lover. He had a certain pride in his niece, and as much affection as his cold temper was capable of, but he had a strange way of showing it. He never made her a speech that was not more or less disquieting, and as for friendly help or advocacy, he apparently felt that not at all his business. Helen did not answer his allusion to Felicia’s manner of publishing her preference, but he continued to speak of the lovers, and gave my sister an impression that he saw no sufficient reason for repudiating Captain Gresham as a suitor for his heiress-niece. But there was the pity of it! While Captain Gresham’s ill-wishers were active in opposition, the few who wished him well could not, or would not, interfere with more than a negative support. I never heard that Mr. Ralph Barrington uttered one strong word in his favour where it might have done good. He just looked on as at a puppet-show, passed his shrewd or cynical criticisms on everybody’s conduct, and asserted his views so calmly that what he said or thought went for nothing. That was his form of selfishness, the commonest form—he would take no trouble. And those who *would* take trouble had so little power! I would have gone through fire and water to serve my darling,

but there was no serving her by any risk or sacrifice of mine. The events of life are woven of one piece, one pattern, all compact; it was not for me to break the thread of hers, or knit it with sunnier colours, whatever my good-will!

This night of the Gladestone Hunt-Ball became a marked epoch in many memories, and for many reasons. Not only was it the occasion on which Felicia made her election openly between her poor lover of great reputation, and the man of rank, splendid reversions and mean character, but it was also the occasion when the idle tattle connecting the noble name of the Lady Augusta Leigh with the name of Mr. Robert Falkner was silenced once and for ever, by his appearance on the scene with his bride—that fair and buxom Scotch cousin whom Helen had prophetically nominated to the rule of his grand house some months ago. He had gone away to be married without announcing his object, and people were much surprised when *The Times* remedied the omission; but scarcely so much surprised as when they saw the lady he had been to fetch—*he* who might have had his choice of a dozen nearer home! She was not very young; they had been boy and girl together, but he had been in love with her all his life, and still thought her the finest woman in the world. And she was a very fine woman; fair, large, rosy, ringletted; with a dimpled chin, a little carnation mouth, an honest, loud voice and laugh, and resplendent shoulders—a far more suitable mate for vigorous Mr. Falkner, than the lithe, spare great lady gossip had assigned to his

ambition. Brisk little Miss Falkner was fond of her sister, but set us the example of quizzing, by letting us know that "Bob" was immensely proud of his wife, who had taken years to subdue; who had, in fact, as a *belle*, defied subjection, until her bloom was on the wane, and she came into our country, and saw for herself how much greater a man her cousin was in strangers' eyes than he had ever loomed before her bright blue orbs.

"A prize pair," Mr. Ralph Barrington called them, still spending his leisure on Helen. Then he went on to say that Mr. Falkner was a shrewd man of sense, and Lady Augusta seemed in no need of consolation. Helen noticed that Mr. Barrington of Stoneleigh was in attendance upon her at the moment.

Within range of their observation was also Mr. Tom Bethell, propping one of the evergreen-wreathed pillars, and wearing a countenance of extreme discontent. His daughter Blanche was as much and as willingly monopolized by Mr. Courteney as her Cousin Felicia was by Captain Gresham, but it was not his own child he was pursuing with such baleful, angry glances. Mr. Ralph Barrington made a study of his visage for some minutes, and then, with what seemed a natural sequence of thought, inquired how Felicia was to be disposed of when Helen left the Manor.

"She is to go first on a visit to Mrs. Bethell at the Dower House, and after that to her grandmamma Barrington at Hampton Court," Helen told him,

and added: "It is decided, I think, that Miss Reed takes my place."

"No, that she will never do; for Felicia loves and respects you, and she has a lively abhorrence of the dowager's gentlewoman. Was there no other fit lady to be found for her companion? Miss Reed reminds me of a ferret—I like her no more than Felicia does. I conjecture that she is appointed in that gentleman's interest"—indicating Mr. Tom Bethell.

Helen believed that he might have suggested her appointment, but it was also desired by Mr. Barrington, in order to avoid the domestication of a stranger at the Manor.

"Felicia should not have consented to it, poor child; they treat her as if she had not a soul to call her own," said her Uncle Ralph pityingly. "I am afraid that her amiable policy of yielding in small things will turn to her disadvantage in greater."

Alas, yes! Felicia was too good to hold her own in a selfish and corrupt generation! Theoretically, the world would allow that she did wisely to prefer Captain Gresham, brave and manly, to the Marquis, base and profligate. But there is such a universal trick of qualifying conduct now-a-days, that to be good, bad, indifferent, [would appear almost convertible terms in the social vocabulary. High place makes wickedness to be tolerated and extenuated. Everyone present at that ball went home, no doubt, discussing what they had seen and heard: some hoping that true love would win; some

wondering at Felicia's want of ambition; some accusing her of passionate folly; some condemning Mr. Barrington for rigour, worldliness, mean pride; for anything but the indolent serene spirit of perfect selfishness which was the actual master of his own and his daughter's lot. Against Captain Gresham no tongue wagged except those of his notorious enemies—and even they had to measure their words more carefully for the future. It could not but be acknowledged that since the lady loved him, he had the best right in the world to persevere until he prevailed over every rival, and carried her off in triumph as his wife: and that she *did* love him, even those persons, most inclined to pour contempt on love, no longer sought to deny.

“A poor fool!” Mr. Tom Bethell called her in the bitterness of his heart, as he watched Captain Gresham cloaking her carefully for her departure when the ball began to thin.

Helen overheard him, and gave him a look to let him understand she did, and Rosy, who was hanging on his arm, eyed them both askance. That girl had no evil in her, no malicious wish, I believe, but her want of thought and incurable itch for tattling and personal gossip, made her the unintentional instrument of many serious mischiefs. And then she listened to her papa, whose favourite she was, with an implicit faith; convinced that he could do and say no wrong, and also, as a consequence, convinced that the things and people he expressed dislike and disapprobation of were the things and people proper to be disliked and dis-

approved. For herself, she had never any cause but to love and be grateful to Felicia, who was kind to her, and all her cousins, and yet she caught the tone of her papa's feeling so strongly that it began to be ill-naturedly remarked how jealous she was. And this so-called jealousy grew so notorious, at last, that one day, when she was giving an exaggerated recital of Felicia's dissensions at home, before several persons, Miss Falkner interrupted her, saying: "Ah! but we must take what you tell us of your cousin with a grain of salt; for you hate her!" Rosy did not comprehend the quotation of a grain of salt. If she carried it to her papa for its application, I wonder what he thought of it, and whether it gave him pause at all.

CHAPTER XXI.

What befel after the Hunt Ball.

UP to the end of the week Felicia heard not one word from her father in reference to her meeting with Captain Gresham at the Hunt Ball. She saw her lover twice again at this time, out on the Langhill, which I may mention by the way. I saw them from my window, pacing for an hour or more under the trees; and, as it afterwards appeared, they were seen by other persons too—by persons not kind or discreet enough to refrain from publishing the matter.

On Sunday the visitors who had so long made gay the Manor pew were absent. Only Felicia and Helen appeared at church, and Felicia looked melancholy; her refined cultivated type of face was quick at expressing the emotions of sadness no less than the emotions of joy. I was not surprised that she should look melancholy when I heard that Mr. Barrington had gone away with Mr. and Mrs. Mellish, and had fixed no day for his return. He had gone too, strange as it may seem, without making any new effort to exact a renunciation of her lover from Felicia. His only reference to the ball was to ask whether the meeting there was a concerted thing:

Felicia replied that she knew Captain Gresham was to be present; and that was all. If her father's displeasure was deep, he hid it well; but his daughter fancied him so pre-occupied with other business, that hers seemed but of very secondary importance at the moment.

But if Mr. Barrington took her open revolt quietly, her grandmamma Bethell did not. A great fuss was brewing at the Dower House, and on the Monday, the dowager came over to the Manor with her factotum, breathing out all the fire, fury and vengeance her mild nature was capable of against Helen, against me, against everybody whom she suspected of being in league with Felicia and Prince Charming. She had heard *such* accounts of her behaviour at the ball, she said, and the anger with which she emphasized her words was no affectation. Felicia kindled too, and asked explanation.

"You made yourself a gazing-stock for the whole room by the way in which you went on with Captain Gresham. Six months ago I could not have believed what I am told of you—now I can believe anything!" was her grannie's rejoinder.

Felicia was amazed, enraged, consternated. She did not attempt any reply on the instant, and the old lady proceeded, while Miss Reed sat by, with her pinky-winky eyes furtively scanning the countenance of the tortured girl.

"That you should inflict a public slight on one gentleman, and then ostentatiously call the world to witness your excessive preference for another was most unwomanly—was *bold, immodest*. Alas! that I

should have to speak and you to listen to such words! But I speak them for your good—”

Felicia rose up in her wrath, and Miss Reed catching her eye, made a precipitate movement to leave the room, but Felicia bade her sit down again, and hear what she had to say. “Grannie, it is this person” (pointing to the factotum) “*this person* who puts such words into your mouth. She and her patron bring you lies of me. Have you known me from a child, and known me so ill as to believe them true? Ask any of our good friends—Mrs. Claylands, Lady Abershaw, Lady Augusta, whether you need feel shame for my behaviour at that ball!”

“I have asked them, and they are all in one tale.”

“*What?* Do *they* say that I am *bold?* that I am *immodest?*”

“No—not that exactly—”

“*Not that at all*, grannie—this person says so, and only she.”

“Indeed, Felicia, I am sorry to assure you that it was your Uncle Tom and your innocent Cousin Rosy.”

“Was it my innocent Cousin Rosy? She does not know the meaning of words yet, poor little parrot! Well, grannie, it is no news that I have an enemy at Ringwood, or that his faithful emissary is at your right hand, and has your ear.”

“Oh, Miss Barrington, what cruel, *cruel* words!” gasped Miss Reed.

“To your face I say them—disprove them if you can! You help to slander me behind my back. I

have had warning of you—I know you! Aye, better, perhaps, than you know yourself; for if you saw your wickedness, you would repent!” With this outbreak Felicia seemed to lose all her self-control; she looked as if she would have flown on the quaking factotum, and have annihilated her.

“Surely, ma’am, she’s mad!” whispered Reed.

The dowager trembled. “Calm yourself, Felicia! What frenzy is this? You are beside yourself!”

“I am not mad, but you will drive me so—or drive me for refuge to him who loves me—which none of you do! which none of you do! Oh! why did my dear mamma leave me to such trouble? I wish I had died with her!” A passionate outburst of tears relieved the overfull heart. Mrs. Bethell was alarmed, was melted, and sent to the Rectory for me, Helen being absent that afternoon with Mr. Cartwright on some business excursion to her future home.

When I went in, there was Felicia weeping: the violence of her excitement astonished me, but in a little while she grew quieter, more composed, and was able to tell her griefs. Her grannie let her speak without interruption, but Miss Reed emitted divers ejaculations expressive of her dissent from what was being stated.

“It is all a sad pity,” said I, when she had done, “and Felicia is in the right of it to be angry. Dear, Mrs. Bethell, you have called me in to mediate:—bear with me while I tell you that in repeating the silly and malicious diatribes of Mr. Tom Bethell you do your worst enemy’s work, and insult your own

child whom you love. You used to distrust Mr. Tom Bethell; latterly you have given him your confidence—the distrust was wiser.”

“Excuse my observing that you wander from the question,” said the dowager. “Is it possible for me to hear Felicia talked of as she is, and not set it before her. Should I be justified in letting her go on still in her folly and worse than folly, without rebuke?”

“That depends upon who they are who so talk of her, and report what you call her folly. You should be very sure of the evidence to her disadvantage before you recite it. Mr. Tom Bethell’s opinion of his niece would go for nothing with a cool, unprejudiced inquirer. For my part, I would rather have his dispraise than his admiration; he sees things and people with such jaundiced eyes.”

Miss Reed was understood to describe him under her breath as “One of the excellent of the earth.”

“Who is *partial*, Mrs. Gower?” exclaimed the dowager. “Partiality is as blind as prejudice. You are a friend to Captain Gresham, and are ready to help him all lengths. Felicia meets him in the fields, as the village girls meet their sweethearts, and you know it—and perhaps approve?”

There was something in the sentiment or manner of this little speech which amused Felicia, and changed her mood. An April smile broke over her clouded countenance, and she said in her airy, capricious way: “There is no difference between a milkmaid in love and me, grannie. And when I hear who it is that would come between me and my

swain, I wish cudgel-play were the fashion amongst gentlemen as well as amongst rustics."

"Felicia, I am shocked at you!"

"Grannie, you provoke me to be shocking! I *do* wish—I wish with all my heart at this minute, that my brave Prince Charming could beat everybody soundly who has an ill-word to say against either of us, so that there might be an end of their lies, and they taught to keep a calm sough for the future."

This idea of her limp, calumnious patron subjected to a beating by Felicia's stout hero was too much for Miss Reed to bear in silence. "Oh! Miss Barrington, pray, *pray*, put away from you such evil thoughts—they have led to murder before now," said she in a voice of lugubrious warning. "One wrong does so fast bring on another. I wish Captain Gresham no harm, not I; and if you had not been the first to make up to him, I don't suppose he would ever have had the presumption to dream of being master at the Manor. But when a young lady steps out of her place, and forgets she is a young lady, there is no predicting what may come of it. But I say, and shall always uphold, that it was your education that was to blame: you have not had them about you that you should have had in the season of youth, so full of perils and temptations; or this degrading entanglement would certainly have been prevented."

The reptile! I could have crushed her! Felicia stood like a stone. Even Mrs. Bethell was mortified and confounded by this effusion of her factotum's

spite. How vexed and disappointed soever she might be at Felicia's want of ambition, she still loved her first and best in the world—what else, indeed, had she to love? Felicia looked at her appealingly, and her grannie responded by a low-toned aside to Miss Reed: "The truth is not always convenient to be spoken."

"I am content to be rebuked for the truth's sake," rejoined the humble companion with a gleam of triumph and satisfaction in her red eyes.

Felicia's colour went—that arrow had struck home; Miss Reed saw and was glad at its rankling.

"A plague on all mischief-mongers!" cried I roundly. "If Felicia will be advised by me she will betake herself to the safe protection of a good husband the very first day she is of age to act for herself."

"I will," said Felicia, "*I will*. I have no friend else able to protect me!"

"No rash vows, foolish girl! Many things may happen before two years are over," said her grannie more gently.

"Yes, indeed! The gentleman might change his mind again, as he has changed it once or twice already."

This was Miss Reed's skilful insinuation, but it failed of its intended effect. Felicia could afford to laugh at it, as well she might. She had a laudable confidence in her lover and in herself. Whether she had been first captivated, or he, or both simultaneously did not import at this date, so conclusive was the result. And she was not so weakly jealous of

his past as to be unhappy or distrustful because he had thought other faces fair before he saw hers. To Miss Reed's suggestion she therefore answered quite calmly that it was likely Captain Gresham had enjoyed some practice in the art of wooing before they met; adding that she was content to be his last love, since it was past praying for that she should be his first. Miss Reed evidenced her chagrin by retorting that she hoped Miss Barrington might not find herself deceived, and have to reckon up as many successors in his favour as predecessors.

"There let us stop," said I. "Impertinence can no further go."

The factotum felt that she had trespassed too far, and tried to qualify her words, but such words, once spoken, cannot be recalled or forgotten. Then the dowager took up her parable against me, and against Helen, whom I defended; and after a debate, warm, long and inconclusive, we separated. Felicia and her grandmamma kissed at parting as if nothing very unusual had been said on either side, but true heart-peace was never restored between them any more. How should it be with that whisperer to keep up the war? Felicia's "*I will*," was quoted and quoted again, and was accepted by all connected with her as the ultimate expression of a fixed resolve. And it seemed from this moment as if her adversaries abandoned their short-lived hope of conquering by a violent opposition, and fell back on their insidious original tactics of passive contempt: leaving time to fight for them, and putting their trust in the chapter of accidents.

I repeated the substance of what had passed at this painful interview to Helen, with a remark that surely it must be out of the question *now* for Miss Reed to take her place at the Manor. Helen did not seem to think, however, that any one besides ourselves would necessarily draw that inference.

"It is wonderful what strong things women will say to each other one day, and practically forgive the next," said she with her serene philosophy. "Felicia and her grannie parted friends. When Felicia meets Miss Reed again, neither will refer to their last meeting, and all will go on as before. Felicia has virtually acceded to Miss Reed's appointment, much as she dislikes it, because her papa dropped a few words to the effect that it would be more agreeable to him to have the dowager's familiar about the house than a stranger—a poor reason, but one sure to prevail with Felicia. Miss Reed is politic enough in a general way. I am surprised she should have forgotten her own interests. She must have been stung herself to have been guilty of such a lapse from her usual caution."

Helen proved right. The cancelling of Miss Reed's engagement was never mooted, desirable as such a step would have been. For granting the factotum possessed of all the virtues essential to a duenna, it was notorious that a mutual dislike existed between her and Felicia. Felicia, however, made no plea for her own release, third persons held aloof from interference, and Miss Reed openly and cheerfully anticipated her removal to the Manor as a piece of good promotion, earned by a long course

of honourable conduct, and faithful service in the family. There was no doubt that when Helen went, she would succeed her; and every day now was bringing my dear sister's change nearer and nearer.

Not to linger over this episode of secondary importance in Felicia's life, I may as well say briefly here, that the marriage of Mr. Cartwright and Helen was celebrated ten days before Christmas. Mr. Barrington came down from town for the occasion, but only at his daughter's very urgent request, and he left again on the evening of the same day. When he was gone, and the house deserted of its wedding-guests, Felicia came across to the Rectory to dine with Arthur and me. The day had not been very glad for her, poor child; we could see that she had been weeping, and had a full heart still, though she tried hard to bear up before us. She had causes enough for her sorrow. Sitting by the fireside after dinner, she told us some incidents of her father's hurried visit which caused Arthur and me seriously to reflect. At the breakfast, I had observed that Mr. Barrington seemed to be in the enjoyment of anything but a disengaged mind; but at the moment I had attributed his pre-occupation to a spice of ill-humour at having to make a cold journey on two successive winter days to please somebody besides himself. The significant incidents that Felicia revealed, betrayed, however, that he had other and deeper reasons for his face of care.

First she mentioned that Mr. Barrington had sold the Manor omnibus, and the team of four magni-

ificent grey roans that ran in it: "And his own hunters, so there is no hope of his coming to stay at Stoneleigh this winter again for more than one or two days at a time. I offered to give up my visits if he would remain with me, but he refused on the plea that it would be exacting too much—as if I would not gladly give up any pleasure of my own to please him! But I am afraid the truth is that he finds better amusement elsewhere. Of course, after such a clearance in the stables, some of the men must go—one groom and a helper, at least; papa left that unsettled, which annoys me; they are respectable servants—if you hear of anybody in want of such men, you might say they have our recommendation. The groom is married."

We then spoke of Christmas in the village, and Felicia colouring, said with tears in her eyes: "I am sorry to be going away. I have never spent Christmas away from the Manor since I was born. It does not seem right to have a cold hearth at such a season. Papa would not listen to my petition that he would come just for that week, and I cannot ask Grannie to leave her own house to come to mine. I obtained, however, that the cottagers should have their bounties just as if we were at home—you will superintend the distribution for me, Cousin Clare, and Carr will save you all trouble about selection and arrangement. Janet I shall take with me to the Dower House."

After a little more talk on this business (how often had I seen the young lady of the Manor happy in the performance of it!) Arthur made some inquiry

about a thinning of the Beecham copses which was then in progress. Felicia looked both pained and confused, and answered him with another inquiry—whether any of the beautiful green rides in the old woods were being destroyed. Arthur told her that several of the grandest trees were down, and many more marked for the axe. She was silent for a minute or two, and then said: “It is a pity, but I cannot forbid it. It is papa, who orders to be done what he pleases.”

“I hope you will make a good fight for the Great Bethell Oaks, if they should ever be threatened again; the loss of them would be an irreparable loss of beauty to the whole village,” said Arthur.

“You may rely upon me for the Great Oaks—the pride of Stoneleigh! I have told papa that I would quarrel even with *him* on their behalf,” replied Felicia; and then she heaved a vast sigh, shook herself, and said, “Let us talk of something else.” I thought of what her mother had foreseen when she lay dying—the trouble, perplexity, and misfortune a very great inheritance may be to a girl. Much of what the poor lady had feared for her child was already come upon her; and she had none to help her in her straits; where her chief help should have been found, there was her very hindrance.

What the something else that we talked of was, I do not now remember, but I remember distinctly the anxious impression that was left on Arthur’s mind and mine after Felicia was gone. There seemed no doubt that Mr. Barrington was drifting

into a new course of ruinous extravagance such as had been for a few years hampered and checked. Now that his daughter had nominally the control of her estates and fortune, it was clear that he mulcted her as much as he chose. While she was still a child chancery had kept a guard upon her revenues, but since her presentation at court in the spring, there was no limit set on her expenditure, and the guiding reins had fallen into the loose grasp of her father, who used her income precisely as if it were his own. Under cover of the life-interest in the property which had been secured to him by the marriage-settlements, he assumed to do many things that were not in his right; and Felicia, if she knew it, felt simply unable to deny him because he was her father.

Mr. Tom Bethell went through a long period of sore affliction, growling and grumbling, railing and remonstrating at the reckless waste of the land of his ancestors. But his complaints were a very old story, and quite ineffectual. People even laughed at his painful concern for a property which he seemed then so little like to inherit; and as he had deliberately thrown away his opportunities of influencing and advising his young kinswoman by indulging his spleen and envy, he could now only stand by and rage helplessly at the greedy administration of Mr. Barrington, which threatened to permanently injure and diminish the famous Bethell estates.

The purchase of the four-in-hand, which was now re-sold, had been Mr. Barrington's initiatory

vanity at his daughter's *débüt*. Felicia had expostulated with him at the time, and had refused to show off with him in the park, and now he was tired of his whim—or he had occasion for the money: probably the latter. The sale of his hunters required more explanation—so did also the shutting up of the Manor at Christmas. No explanation was, however, forthcoming, and the neighbourhood was free to form its own conjectures. We were now pretty sure that it was not mere costly caprices which necessitated the destruction of the old woods; it was the way money went in the fatal society of such men as Mr. Mellish and Colonel Charteris—a secret way on which neither Felicia nor any one else could keep a guard. They only knew it was gone when some such raid on the finest timber of the estate was perpetrated, as was being now done in the Beecham Copses.

“A few years more of this havoc, and Stoneleigh will wear the aspect of a poor man's property: there will not be a stick standing that has come to its full growth!” was Mr. Tom Bethell's constant and lamentable prediction.

Arthur began to express a fear that the prediction stood a good chance of being fulfilled.

CHAPTER XXII.

Under Thatch.

THE morning after Helen's wedding, we rose to snow—all the world wrapt in its white winter mantle. I love to see the snow at Christmas, the sparkling deep drifts, the laden branches of the cedars, the icicles hanging to the eaves. And yet the sudden, seasonable accession of frost and cold means much suffering to the poor; means death to the aged, the infirm, the feeble infant, to the weak and sickly whose lives have long hung upon a thread. In a village where everybody is known, this first result of Christmas weather comes home to us forcibly.

I had bidden Felicia good-bye, and had received her last instructions about the School Feast, the annual doles and bounties of the Manor, and towards noon I returned to my house, grieved and annoyed in her grief and annoyance. She was to go to her grandmamma's later in the day, and was busy settling with Carr a multitude of small things for other people that must not be neglected and forgotten in her absence. She was a most kind and thoughtful creature—most careful that none should lose or suffer by any fault of hers.

Lame Simeon had swept a wide circle for the children to run round with their hoops, and there they were, loud and merry, varying their play with a game of soft snowballs. While I looked on,

Arthur returned from the village, and told me, amongst other news, that young widow Burt was much worse, and had expressed a wish to see me. In the afternoon, soon after four o'clock, I went. The frost was then very keen, and the sun gone. There was evidently more snow to fall. The village lads were in school, and all was still—so still and hushed that at some distance from the cottage whither I was on my way, I heard the sweet voice of Felicia, singing in the little confined chamber under the snow-lapt thatch where the sick woman lay:—I think it has been mentioned before that singing hymns to them was Felicia's way of comforting her poor sick neighbours. I listened until the strain ceased, standing under the pent of the door, and looking out over the broad pale landscape. One has thoughts at such a time! What extremes seemed met there overhead. Health, wealth, love, beauty, hope—sickness, poverty, bereavement and the shadow of death. And who would have undertaken to say which was the happier, which the better? Not I assuredly who knew Felicia's perils, and the young widow's near safety.

I have observed that women early in life, and especially such as are mothers, have a long regret at dying. It had been very sad with the little widow Burt for months. There was no hope of her continuance, and yet she could not reconcile her mind at all to leaving her boy. Her mother-in-law was old; she herself was a daughter of the regiment to which her husband had belonged, and her father had fallen in the same campaign. What would be-

come of the child when his grandmother was gone? that was her constant perplexity and distress. God, who we told her is a father to the fatherless, was a long way off, and the tender mercies of men to the children of the poor are very cruel—thus she reasoned, and refused to be comforted. It was not until Felicia promised that *she* would take care of the lad—feed him, clothe him, put him to school, give him his maintenance as an apprentice to some trade, send him to the army, or take him into her service at the Manor, that the poor dying mother could listen to any of the promises of religion. But when that was settled, her spirit ceased chafing against the will of God, and she told Arthur: “Now I know that the Lord is good; for He has put it into the heart of the dear young lady to be helper to my boy.”

Felicia had a true, ingenuous sympathy. She did not reiterate words and pledges only, but she took in hand sock-knitting for her small *protégé*, and I believe the sight of the wee brown wool sock with ball and needles, brought out of her pocket during her visits, was a real consolation, such as only a mother who has pictured her orphan lad tramping barefoot through a hard world can estimate the depth and value of. Knitting and singing, Felicia beguiled many hours of the weariness and painful weakness that her humble friend had to pass through on her road to rest. The poor little widow was only twenty years old, and had never been much instructed. But she was affectionate, grateful and docile, and it was in speaking of her

that my darling said with that sweet humility which was one of her most touching characteristics: "She knows much more than I, though she may not be able to read and write well. See what she has suffered and is suffering—How should I teach her what to feel, what to think, I who have had no experience? If her own sorrows and trials don't teach her, what profit could there be in my hearsay precepts? There must be a multitude of thoughts in her heart, quite secret from us. God does not leave himself without a witness in the meanest, most ignorant, and in the midst of her sorrows, so patiently endured, I have no doubt, not I, that His comforts are refreshing her soul!"

Felicia was surely right. It is a grievous and a mischievous mistake to school persons in health or in sickness upon religion as some volunteer missionaries do:—going amongst strangers with the grimace of christian sympathy and a flux of pious babble, but without either the desire or the capacity to find out the moral pain or disease, or the practical distress the patients labour under. Miss Colquhoun was a spiritual quack-doctor, a specific-monger of this sort; a most presumptuous one, equally ready to prescribe for soul or body, afraid of no responsibility, but unblessed with an ounce of that understanding, sublimated by imagination, tenderness and love, which enables a few elect persons to put themselves in the place of those they would amend. She had heard of the widow Burt, as the daughter and wife of soldiers who had fallen in the war, and came to visit her in her sickness;

but these visits were productive only of tears and revolt; and Felicia begged her, at last, to keep away, which she very reluctantly did, shaking her head and indulging in sad reflections on the hardness of the poor woman's heart, and the little hope there was in her state unless she was sincerely and firmly dealt with. "Is not God dealing with her—is He not able to accomplish His work?" I myself said to her; but she was depressed and doubtful, and evidently felt that there would have been a fuller assurance of it had she been allowed to persevere in her ministrations.

While Felicia remained upstairs, I stayed in the kitchen below with old Mrs. Burt, and talking low ourselves, we heard the voices above: Felicia counting the loops for the heel of a sock, the baby's mother admiring the fellow to it which was finished. Something was then said of the baby himself, and there was a sound of sobs, and after that a brief silence, then the lovely, soft singing of another hymn. Scarcely was it finished when the brougham from the Manor drove down the hill, and stopped in the road opposite the cottage. Janet, shawled to the nose, sat on the box beside the coachman, and cast many glances to the window of the upper room where she heard her dear mistress. Felicia did not long delay them in the cold. In a few minutes she descended the narrow stair, and I helped her to put on the warm wrap she had left below. She did not speak, she would have had a difficulty in speaking; her countenance was full of tears; and when she was seated in the carriage, she sank back and hid her face.

The old grandmother, grave and composed, remarked: "She is thinking that she has seen the last of poor Lucy—aye, it is easy crying when one's young, and death the worst of our troubles!"

The fire was burning frostily in the warm, white little chamber which Felicia had just left; and the young mother lay smiling to herself at two fingers thrust into the tiny brown sock, when I went up to her. The baby was in the old cradle which had rocked its father before it, and fast asleep, for a blessing; for as his grandmother said: "He was a powerful bairn for eating and sleeping, and when he was awake and cried, folks heard him"—a fact that all the village could have verified, ourselves at the Rectory not excepted.

There was a marked change in the wan face of the poor young creature, but she looked happy, and spoke with a perfect calm: "I shall not see the dear lady any more here; she kissed me when she went, and I shall know her in Heaven, I told her—O! the blessing she's been to me! May she never want comfort in her own sorrows!"

The slow bright eyes were expressive of a gratitude beyond words to utter:—that was how the poor all spoke of my darling; they did not pray for her to be spared sorrow; for that, they know, is spared to none whom God loves, but they did pray all that she might never be left comfortless. Ah! how it wrings my heart to remember!

Felicia had charged me to send a messenger to the Dower House with the tidings when Lucy Burt

died. She died three days after their last meeting, and word of the event was dispatched as she had desired. The following morning she rode over, and saw the poor young thing in her coffin. She had never seen death before, she told me, and now she saw it disarmed of terror—beautiful as a sculptured face.

“Who will come to look at me when I am dead?” she asked, with a sudden, mournful cadence.

I begged her not to talk so—with a long life, as we might hope, before her. Lucy, she said, was but one year older than herself. The reflection was, perhaps, natural, but I was glad to see her shake it off before she left me. She was not altogether in spirits; she felt being absent from the Manor, with Christmas coming on. She had been into the house, upstairs and down, and the fireless rooms looked dark and deserted.

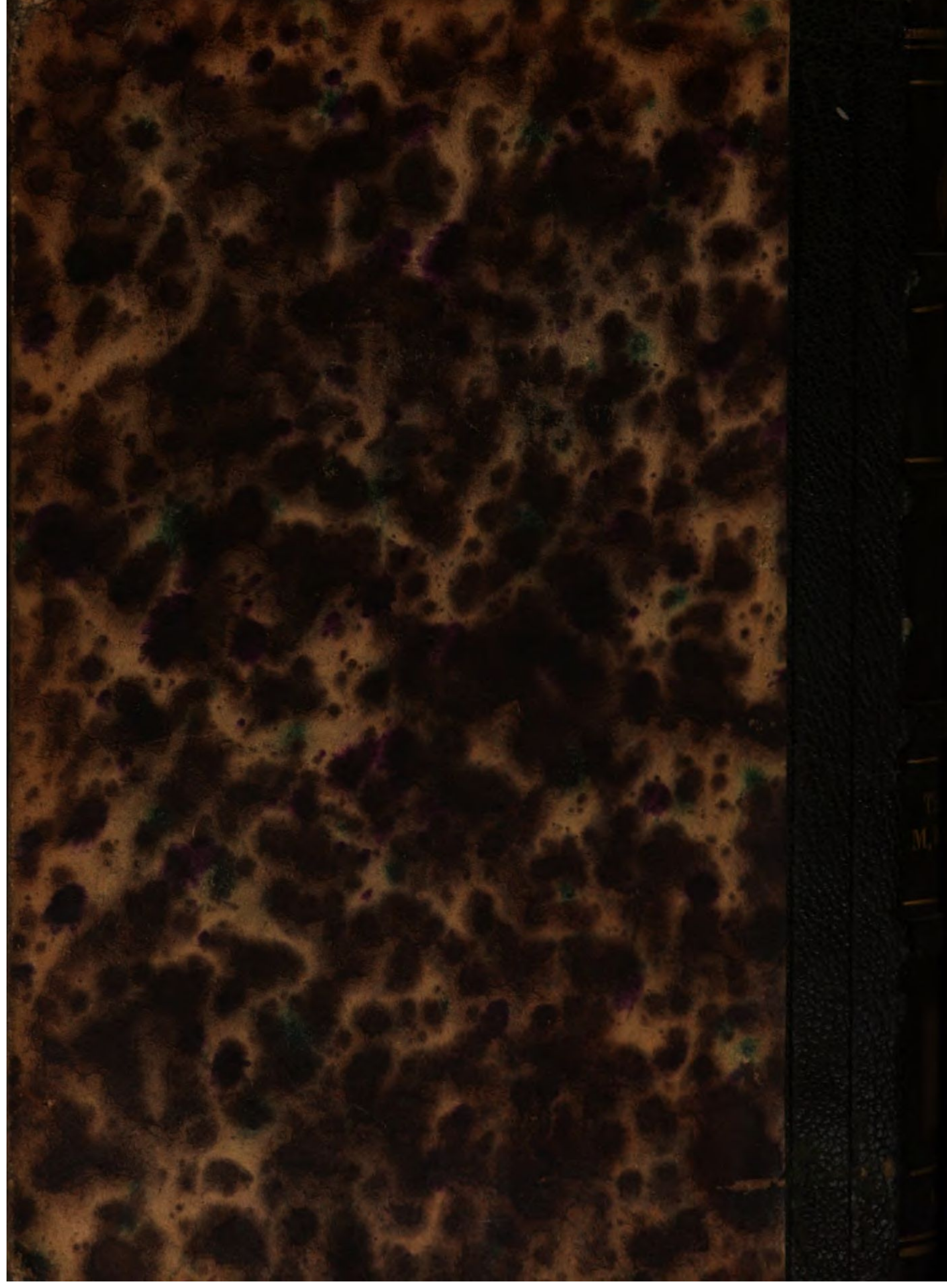
“They *are* dark and deserted, but good fires and your presence will soon brighten them again,” said I to cheer her. “And you are not away for *very* long.”

She did not know for how long. We had but little conversation; the errand on which she had come was *triste*, and the sight of the empty house depressed her. She told me, however, that her news of Captain Gresham was good, and always good; and if she had no trouble but what he gave her she should be the most blessed woman in the world!

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